

LEADERSHIP ADAPTABILITY WITHIN THE
HIGHER EDUCATION INDUSTRY

by

Rebecca F. Niemeyer Rens

Dissertation

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Business Administration

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Abstract

Dynamism in the higher education industry (HEI) has created unprecedented complexity and uncertainty for leaders at colleges and universities across the globe. The challenges to competitive advantage and sustainability created by dynamic conditions have been exacerbated and accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic and health crisis. HEI leaders are struggling to adapt antiquated and traditionally held methods and practices to navigate the rapid changes and survive the resulting chaos. The ability of leaders to adapt to dynamism in contemporary industry conditions is influenced by the external and internal environments; in term, these leaders' capacity for change impacts the adaptability of the institutions they serve. By recognizing their organizations as complex adaptive systems and employing practices that enhance communication, remain consistent with core values, and exhibit a strong commitment to their members, senior- and mid-level leaders at small private liberal arts colleges and universities are engaging in adaptive behaviors and creating adaptive organizations better equipped to thrive despite challenges.

Key words: adaptability, leadership, dynamic environment, higher education, complexity
leadership

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Dedication

To my faithful God

Only by His grace, wisdom, inspiration, and power was this particular calling in my life possible.

Soli Deo Gloria

To Renee'

For always loving me, believing in me, and instilling in me a passion for learning.

I miss you mom – so much.

To Charlie

For asking about my progress, being proud of me, and fostering my independence and strong will – they were very useful.

Thanks dad.

To my husband and daughters - Robert, Amber, Amanda, and Amelia

For supporting my choices, encouraging me when it was hard, celebrating the milestones with me, never questioning why or doubting I could, and, of course, for that jar full of sunshine.

Best cheerleaders ever!

Love you family!

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Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Approvals	iii
Dedication	iv
Acknowledgments	v
List of Figures	xi
Section 1: Foundation of the Study	1
Background of the Study	2
Problem Statement	3
Purpose Statement	4
Research Questions	5
Nature of the Study	6
Discussion of Constructivist Paradigm	7
Discussion of Case Study Design	8
Discussion of Qualitative Method	9
Discussion of Triangulation	10
Summary of the Nature of the Study	10
Conceptual Framework	11
Concepts	12
Complexity Leadership Theory	13

Actors	14
Constructs (& Variables)	14
Relationship Between Concepts, Theories, Actors, (and) Constructs (, and Variables)	14
Summary of the Research Framework.....	15
Definition of Terms.....	15
Assumptions, Limitations, Delimitations	17
Assumptions.....	17
Limitations	18
Delimitations.....	19
Significance of the Study	20
Reduction of Gaps.....	21
Implications for Biblical Integration.....	22
Benefit to Business Practice and Relationship to Leadership.....	26
Summary of the Significance of the Study	26
A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature.....	27
Business Practices	27
The Problem.....	29
Concepts.....	37
Theories.....	45

Constructs (& Variables)	52
Related Studies.....	59
Anticipated Themes	62
Discovered Themes.....	67
Summary of the Literature Review.....	71
Summary of Section 1 and Transition	72
Section 2: The Project.....	73
Purpose Statement.....	73
Role of the Researcher	73
Research Methodology	75
Discussion of Flexible Design	75
Discussion of Qualitative Multi-Case Study Method.....	76
Discussion of Methods for Triangulation	77
Summary of Research Methodology	77
Participants.....	78
Population and Sampling	78
Discussion of Population	79
Discussion of Sampling	80
Summary of Population and Sampling.....	81
Data Collection and Organization.....	82

Data Collection Plan	82
Instruments.....	83
Data Organization Plan	84
Summary of Data Collection and Organization.....	85
Data Analysis	85
Emergent Ideas.....	86
Coding Themes	86
Interpretations	87
Data Representation	87
Analysis for Triangulation	88
Summary of Data Analysis	88
Reliability and Validity.....	89
Reliability.....	89
Validity	91
Bracketing	92
Summary of Reliability and Validity	92
Summary of Section 2 and Transition	93
Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change	94
Overview of the Study	94
Presentation of the Findings.....	95

Themes Discovered and Interpreted	97
Representation and Visualization of the Data.....	102
Relationship of the Findings	102
Summary of the Findings.....	127
Application to Professional Practice	129
Improving General Business Practice	129
Potential Application Strategies.....	131
Summary of Application to Professional Practice	134
Recommendations for Further Study	134
Reflections	136
Personal & Professional Growth.....	136
Biblical Perspective	137
Summary of Reflections	140
Summary of Section 3.....	141
References.....	142
Appendix A: Interview Guide (Creswell & Poth, 2018)	151

List of Figures

<i>Figure 1.</i> Relationship between concepts	12
<i>Figure 2.</i> Visual representation of the findings	102

Section 1: Foundation of the Study

“Our decentralized higher education community is awash with problems and in the throes of significant change. . . . [M]any leadership groups are ill equipped to advise and govern modern colleges. . . . [T]he pressures upon higher education to change and adapt has never been greater” (Mitchell & King, 2018, pp. ix-x). In making these claims, the authors succinctly identify contemporary issues creating the need for the research study performed. Mitchell and King (2018) indicate the dynamic conditions and extreme challenges facing leaders of higher education institutions (HEIs) and the need for adaptability. Several other researchers, including Marquez-Ramos and Mourelle (2016), Gigliotti and Ruben (2017), Khan (2017), and Haberberger (2018), concur with Mitchell and King (2018), affirming that HEIs, particularly small private liberal arts (SPLA) institutions, are vulnerable to the contemporary dynamic environment and require transformed leadership styles and methods for survival. More recently, Fumasoli et al. (2020) asserted that those associated with the higher education industry consider a leader’s ability to adapt is a crucial element for surviving dynamic environmental conditions. Similarly, Cheslock and Riggs (2020) claim that leadership performance provides a strategic component for successfully navigating complexity and uncertainty as competition between institutions intensifies. The conditions and concerns expressed by multiple academic and practitioner authors have provided the basis and justification for the research study performed.

In performing the following study, the researcher employed a qualitative case study approach to garner the real-lived experiences of SPLA leaders and to better understand their ability to adapt and impact their institutions’ sustainability in uncertain and complex scenarios. Research questions were developed to address underlying issues critical to understanding leadership adaptability in dynamic conditions and the impact of leader response to institutional

adaptability. The research involved participants from multiple SPLA institutions located in the Midwestern United States and included personal perspectives from interviews with senior and mid-level leaders. The research framework was based on several concepts regarding dynamism, complex adaptive systems, and leadership adaptability; Complexity Leadership Theory was applied to better understand the impact of adaptive leader styles and strategies on competitive advantage and sustainability. The researcher collected data from multiple sources including documentation, archive information, personal interviews, and informal observations. The sample size achieved saturation from personal interviews at multiple sites, and all participants were provided with copies of interview transcripts and offered the opportunity to clarify and elaborate on the content to ensure accuracy and correct interpretation of the researcher. Computer software was employed to transcribe and organize the data collected, and notes, transcripts, insights, and themes were collected in Word documents for review and analysis. Findings have been documented both narratively and visually where applicable and appropriate for simplification and clarity.

Background of the Study

Hilbun and Mamiseinvili (2016) contend that shifting environmental factors create significant challenges for institutions of higher education struggling to compete for students and achieve sustainability. The authors claim that leadership style contributes a key element for navigating and surviving dynamic conditions. Khan (2017) agrees, noting that colleges and universities experience significant susceptibility to the fluctuations of internal and external environments that render traditional leadership styles and strategies ineffective for achieving sustainability. Abreu Pederzini (2018) notes that leaders of universities have been significantly impacted by environmental trends, increasing the need to focus attention on methods of

competitive advantage. Fumasoli et al. (2020) specifically identifies various dynamic environmental factors threatening the mission and autonomy of colleges and universities; they contend that transforming institutional design is critical to achieving improved strategic positioning. Colleges and universities must consider the impact of the practices and theories institutional leaders implement for assessing and adapting to changing conditions (Abreu Pederzini, 2018). Abreu Pederzini (2018) asserts that competitive advantage must be thoughtfully re-assessed and re-designed. The practice becomes particularly challenging in the higher education industry, and the degree to which leaders competently make sense of this critical market factor influences institutional sustainability (Abreu Pederzini, 2018).

Kahn (2017) suggests adaptive leadership styles as a solution to improve an institution's ability to assess and plan for dynamic environmental issues, thereby improving sustainability. Abreu Pederzini (2018) contends that when leaders adapt subjective sensemaking to include communal approaches to perspectives regarding competitive advantage, they more aptly navigate dynamic environments. Research results indicate that the higher education industry considers leaders capable of adapting institutional design a critical solution element for achieving improved strategic positioning that leads to competitive advantage and sustainability (Fumasoli et al., 2020).

Problem Statement

The general problem addressed is the failure of leaders to adapt leadership styles and strategies during dynamic environmental conditions within colleges and universities resulting in a loss of competitive advantage and reduced sustainability. Marquez-Ramos and Mourelle (2016) claim colleges and universities operate in dynamic environments that demand adaptation of designs and strategies to achieve institutional sustainability. Khan (2017) asserts that colleges

and universities suffer from vulnerability to dynamic environmental conditions, advocating for adaptive leadership styles that provide more flexibility and encourage members to embrace fast-paced and changing situations. Bendermacher et al. (2016) affirm the importance of competitive advantage in contemporary dynamic environments encompassing the higher education industry and emphasize the critical function and influence of leadership styles and strategies. Hilbun and Mamiseishvili (2016) note that dynamic environmental conditions challenge institutions of higher education to maintain competitive advantage for student enrollment and financial sustainability. Gigliotti and Ruben (2017) concur, contending that contemporary dynamism requires institutions to abandon traditional leadership conceptions, styles, and strategies to meet the demands of a diverse community of stakeholders and to achieve sustainability and renewal. The specific problem addressed is the failure of leaders to adapt leadership styles and strategies during dynamic environmental conditions within small private liberal arts colleges and universities in the midwestern United States, resulting in a loss of competitive advantage and reduced sustainability.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative case study research design was to add to the body of knowledge by increasing understanding and exploring reasons leaders potentially do not adapt in the higher education industry during dynamic conditions and the impact this has on institution competitive advantage and sustainability. The problem was explored through an in-depth study of leadership styles and strategies in dynamic environments and its impact on competitive advantage and sustainability at small private liberal arts colleges and universities.

The use of purposive case study achieved increased understanding by implementing sampling methods that solicited current leaders at two or more small private liberal arts schools

in an effort to increase analytical benefits (Yin, 2018). The participants were considered and recruited by the researcher from areas within the midwestern United States, specifically regions of southeast South Dakota, northeast Nebraska, and northwest Iowa.

Research Questions

The research questions and sub-questions collectively addressed the underlying issues that must be understood in leaders' adaptability during dynamic environmental conditions and the impact of adaptability on competitive advantage and sustainability of small private liberal arts colleges and universities.

RQ1. How do leaders fail to adapt leadership styles and strategies in dynamic environmental conditions?

RQ1. a. What leadership actions and behaviors contribute to the failure of leaders to adapt leadership styles and strategies in dynamic environmental conditions?

RQ1. b. What leadership actions and behaviors contribute to the success of leaders to adapt leadership styles and strategies in dynamic environmental conditions?

RQ2. How do dynamic environmental conditions impact small private liberal arts colleges and universities?

RQ2. a. How do leaders of small private liberal arts colleges and universities adapt leadership styles and strategies to respond to dynamic environmental conditions?

RQ3. What leadership styles and strategies at small private liberal arts colleges and universities contribute to leaders' failure to adapt during dynamic environmental conditions?

RQ3. a. How does the failure of leaders to adapt leadership styles and strategies during dynamic environmental conditions contribute to loss of competitive advantage and reduced sustainability at small private liberal arts colleges and universities?

Research question RQ1 attempted to identify and understand why leaders fail to adapt leadership styles and strategies. The corresponding sub-questions 1a and 1b sought to provide a balanced perspective of how leadership actions and behaviors contribute or hinder their adaptability to new styles and strategies. Research question RQ2 explored the environmental conditions impacting colleges and universities while RQ2a specifically sought to generate understanding about how leaders respond to their environments. Research question RQ3 explored variations in leadership styles and strategies, and the corresponding sub-question 3a described how the potential failure of leaders to adapt influences loss of competitive advantage and reduced sustainability.

Nature of the Study

The nature of the study was exploratory and conducted with a flexible design using qualitative methods; specifically, a multiple case study design was used. A constructivist paradigm was applied to explore the multiple realities of individual leaders (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher became interdependent with participants, employing active listening skills and granting all participants full expression (Mutepa, 2016).

A flexible design founded in a constructivist worldview using a qualitative research methodology that specifically employs case study design examined leadership adaptability in dynamic environments within the higher education industry. In implementing a constructivist paradigm, the study relied heavily on participants' perspectives in shaping results (Mutepa, 2016). Implementing a qualitative research method allowed for themes to emerge while

providing opportunity for rigor and structure within the data collection and analysis processes (Creswell, 2016). Employing case study design enhanced the understanding of present-day factors and lent relevancy to the study (Yin, 2018).

Discussion of Constructivist Paradigm

Mutepa (2016) notes that employing a constructivist paradigm requires an interdependence of the researcher and participants, giving voice to participants and stakeholders while actively listening to gain understanding and assign meaning. Creswell and Poth (2018) concur that constructivism provides an interpretive framework with an interdependent perspective that allows for the existence of multiple realities developed over time by the individual experiences and inter-connectedness of participants and researchers. The study considered emerging environmental factors experienced by participants and perceived to be the reality of their particular cultures and situations (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Gathering participant responses and performing researcher analysis occurred simultaneously throughout the process to unitize data and code information to identify emerging themes (Mutepa, 2016). A constructivist paradigm proffered an appropriate study construct for developing a richer understanding garnered from participants' perspectives regarding the intersection of leadership styles and sustainability of small private liberal arts institutions in dynamic environments.

A postpositivist paradigm was rejected for the inapplicability to qualitative research and limited consideration of alternative realities (Creswell, 2016). A critical worldview and a pragmatic paradigm did not provide appropriate foundations for the study due to the disregard of evolving individual realities and the influence of persuasive language seeking to right injustice and the motivation to solve problems rather than understand them more fully (Creswell, 2016).

Discussion of Case Study Design

Yin (2018) notes that case study designs provide especially applicable practices for addressing problem statements regarding contemporary circumstances, such as the influence of dynamic environments and leadership on competitive advantage and sustainability, with inquiries related to “how” and “why.” Creswell and Poth (2018) indicate that case study design delivers a functional approach when a single case or multiple cases can be identified as the focus of the research. The design further contributed to the justification of specific cases, the identification of themes, the development of results through analysis, and the presentation of case-descriptive outcomes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Particularly for the research performed, case study methods were useful for identifying one or more small private colleges or universities to study where similar values and objectives can be identified and analyzed to determine how individual leadership styles and strategies can be described.

Creswell (2016) indicates that the intention of the research identifies the appropriate design. Qualitative design methods rejected in the development of this study included narrative, phenomenology, grounded theory, and ethnography. Narrative design too narrowly focuses on a single individual, neglecting to provide the broad perspective necessary to address the research problem impacting an entire industry. Phenomenology, although addressing valuable contextual contributions, was avoided due to its emphasis on describing the commonalities of participants rather than allowing their distinct and unique experiences to make contributions to the research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Grounded Theory was not chosen for the study because the design seeks to create a particular theory and, despite the fact that complexity theory provided basis for the research, the intent of the research was to allow for transformation and idea growth rather than confirmation of existing theory. Lastly, ethnography was not chosen because the design did

not allow for the cultural diversity and unique characteristics of various participants experiencing the research problem (Creswell, 2016).

Discussion of Qualitative Method

Clark and Sousa (2015) contend that qualitative research increasingly gains credibility among academics and practitioners as industries more readily employ and participate in this approach to address problems and concerns such as dynamic environmental conditions within the higher education industry. Improved techniques for knowledge sharing and social media developments enhance the relevance and impact of this methodology (Clark & Sousa, 2015). Creswell and Poth (2018) assert that implementing qualitative methods when specific groups and issues need to be examined make the approach appropriate for addressing small liberal arts colleges and universities. Mutepa (2016) claims that an essential element of flexible qualitative research, which allows for adjustments and adaptability in garnering and interpreting data, focuses on gathering and discerning meaning by listening to the responses of participants. Qualitative research uses multiple methods, generally at participant locations, for collecting a comprehensive understanding of perspectives as influenced by background and interpretations (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Qualitative research appropriately applied to the study used inductive reasoning and experiences developed from data analysis in social settings where quantitative measures become less useful for determining applicable and relevant theory and emerging ideas (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Quantitative methodology was not chosen for this study due to the strict confines and statistical nature of the approach (Creswell, 2014). The researcher considered reciprocal communications crucial for lending increased understanding and relevance to the results of this study. In addition, as noted by Creswell (2014), a quantitative approach does not allow for the

generation and evolution of ideas and themes through the ongoing interactions of the researcher with participants. Although statistical data provided relevant insights, this research study sought to uncover the perceptions and interpretations of the participants, reducing the applicability of sterile and distant information garnered through quantitative methods.

Discussion of Triangulation

Creswell (2016) notes that triangulation is a validation strategy that consists of “building evidence from different sources to establish the themes in a study” (p. 191). The researcher incorporated multiple methods for collection of data including gathering context and details from public websites, reviewing industry statistics, and engaging in extensive conversations with organizational gatekeepers to enhance triangulation efforts. Multiple other sources of data also helped achieve triangulation including organizational archive documents, institution publications, and personal interviews from individuals, which were utilized to discern patterns among various leaders’ perspectives and behaviors. In pursuing triangulation, the researcher made a best effort to obtain reliable data and validate participant realities.

Summary of the Nature of the Study

In summary, a constructivist paradigm was applied to a qualitative multiple-case study approach to accomplish the study’s purpose and answer established research questions. The constructivist worldview allowed the researcher to expand understanding through the reliance on participants’ perspectives of the impact of leadership style and strategies on competitive advantage and institution sustainability. Employing qualitative methods provided the flexibility necessary for simultaneously collecting data and making adjustments, and for allowing ideas to emerge through the analysis and digestion of information garnered. The case study design was useful in this research for identifying similarities among participants to better compare and

assess specific outcomes. Engaging in triangulation of data enabled the researcher to incorporate trustworthy data and generate rich narrative based on participants' perspectives and experiences.

Conceptual Framework

Adom et al. (2018) affirm the importance of developing frameworks that guide the study and provide researchers with avenues for explaining how the problem will be examined and how results will add to existing knowledge. The authors note that conceptual frameworks supply useful structure for identifying the relationship of concepts and variables related to the topic of the study (Adom et al., 2018). Adom et al. (2018) explain that conceptual frameworks differ from theoretical frameworks, focusing on concepts and the emergence of theories rather than on testing existing theory and allowing the researcher to propose solutions to the problem being studied.

The conceptual framework for this study was founded on concepts related to leadership adaptability in the higher education industry. The research implemented Complexity Leadership Theory (CLT), which encompasses Adaptive Leadership Theory (ALT), to better understand the impact of institutional leaders on competitive advantage and sustainability of small private liberal arts colleges and universities. The information garnered exemplified how CLT influences the concepts of existing leadership styles and strategies in dynamic conditions; results also produced new ideas for expanding the application of the theory specifically to leaders within the higher education industry. CLT was used to address the research questions and provided an avenue for identifying emerging themes throughout the progression of the study. Findings confirm the complexity and inter-relatedness of the elements noted in the original conceptual framework and that HEI leaders' ability to engage in complexity leadership theory and methods

leaders. Haberberger (2018) notes the complications associated with adapting leadership to the demands of modern-day dynamic environments while simultaneously maintaining core values and objectives of a truly liberal arts education. According to Khan (2017), institutions of higher education encounter significant influence from dynamic environmental conditions, and fast-paced changes create challenges for adapting traditional leadership styles and strategies.

Adaptability Related to Competitive Advantage and Sustainability. This research was also based on the concept that the potential failure of higher education leaders to adapt corresponds to the loss of competitive advantage and reduced sustainability of small private liberal arts colleges and universities (Cheslock, J. & Riggs, S., 2020; Hilbun, A. & Mamiseinvili K., 2016). Cheslock and Riggs (2020) confirm that universities and colleges compete with increasing intensity, and the authors suggest that leaders adapt institutional pricing strategies as a key to sustainability in dynamic environments. Hilbun and Mamiseinvili (2016) assert that the failure of leaders to adapt has more significance on loss of competitive advantage and sustainability than the dynamic conditions. Pederzini and David (2018) explore how leaders of institutions of higher education need to adapt and align their strategies to accomplish sustainable competitive advantage and survive dynamic environments.

Complexity Leadership Theory

Complexity leadership theory, which encompasses Adaptive Leadership Theory (ALT), was included in the study to better understand the impact of adaptive styles and strategies on competitive advantage and sustainability of small private liberal arts colleges and universities. Makinen (2018) integrates CLT to expose leadership styles and strategies impacting the adaptability capabilities of leaders and institutions of higher education. Northouse (2016) provides a definition and model of ALT that identifies dynamic conditions requiring adaptability

and the behaviors leaders must be willing to employ to navigate multiple perspectives and changing environments. Kershner and McQuillan (2016) indicate the vital role of an adaptable leadership approach through the application of CLT in educational institutions for embracing and managing change.

Actors

The actors related to this research study were senior- and mid-level leaders of small private liberal arts colleges and universities who developed and implemented strategic planning and decision-making. Senior level leaders included presidents, provosts, vice presidents, and C-level executives. Mid-level leaders were other human actors and included individuals in roles such as directors, deans, and chairs. Organizational actors included in the multi-site case study were competing small, private, liberal arts colleges and universities.

Constructs & Variables

Variables in the research study included leadership actions and behaviors, styles and strategies, and adaptability. Other variables were various dynamic environmental conditions related to external forces and internal institution culture and worldview. The researcher attempted to find participants from similarly sized institutions with ethical values resembling each other.

Relationship Between Concepts, Theories, Actors, Constructs, and Variables

The specific research problem and research questions intended to focus on the role of leaders in managing their complex organizations to accomplish common goals of competitive advantage and sustainability. The purpose of this study was to explore how leadership adaptability in complex dynamic environments contributes to actions, decision-making, and strategic behaviors that influence colleges and universities. The selected conceptual framework

in Figure 1 allowed the research to be governed by Complexity Leadership Theory that recognizes higher education institutions (HEIs) as complex organizations impacted by dynamic environmental conditions requiring leadership performance, methods, and adaptability to manage change and uncertainty for accomplishing competitive advantage and sustainability.

Summary of the Research Framework

Complexity Leadership Theory will provide an appropriate conceptual framework for this study as a tool useful in complex adaptable systems for developing processes that enhance innovation, learning, and adaptability (Makinen, 2018). Comparative advantage theory will also lend conceptual insights for assessing objectives and results of leadership characteristics' impact on competitive advantage and institutional sustainability. In addition to implementing existing theories, the research will identify educational institutions as complex adaptable systems that incorporate various actors and demand interdependence to achieve common goals (Makinen, 2018). Other concepts will be implemented that indicate the relationships between leadership adaptability and dynamic environmental conditions, and also leadership adaptability and competitive advantage and sustainability. The human actors involved in the research included senior and mid-level leaders at multiple sites who represented the organizational actors in the study. Multiple variables were included in the research in terms of leaders, individual institutions, and the HEI environmental landscape.

Definition of Terms

Adaptive leadership: Complex leadership style that continuously produces adaptive change by consistently challenging status quo assumptions and processes within organizational systems while focusing on helping followers adjust and thrive in new circumstances (Kershner & McQuillan, 2016; Northouse, 2016).

Birth dearth: Refers to the reduced number of college-aged students available for recruitment due to population declines largely brought on by the Great Recession of 2007 (Hilbun & Mamiseinvili, 2016). Population migration patterns and immigration rates further complicate the issue; HEIs in the northeast and midwestern United States are expected to be most significantly impacted (Grawe, 2018).

Comparative advantage: The higher education industry identifies competitive advantage as a critical element relating to marketization, often more accurately described as the leaders' perceptions and sensemaking of their positioning among those institutions they consider to be competitors, especially in dynamic environments (Abreu Pederzini, 2018).

Complex adaptive leadership: A style of leadership that embraces complexity within environments and concentrates on achieving adaptive outcomes through self-minimization; balancing administrative, enabling, and adaptive roles; networking; empowering others; promoting teamwork; and creating institutional cultures conducive to adapting to change and dynamic conditions (Kershner & McQuillan, 2016; Makinen, 2018; Watkins, et al., 2017).

Complex adaptive systems: Interdependent non-linear networks containing various diverse actors and units operating at multiple levels; networks that collaborate and engage cooperatively while adapting to changing contexts to accomplish a common goal (Gantasala, 2015; Kershner & McQuillan, 2016; Makinen, 2018).

Complexity leadership theory: A leadership paradigm that comprehensively includes administrative, adaptive, and enabling roles contemporary leaders must fill to acknowledge the emerging and complex nature of network interactions; facilitate learning, innovation, and adaptability within complex organizational systems; and meet demands of dynamic environments (Kershner & McQuillan, 2016; Makinen, 2018; Northouse, 2016).

Sensemaking: A social construction activity in which leaders of higher education institutions attempt to interpret and explain sets of indicators from their environments to navigate the complexities of dynamic conditions (Abreu Pederzini, 2018).

Sustainability: The ability of an educational institution to establish value-increasing strategies not being provided by any competitors and not easily duplicated by competitors (Sriwidadi et al., 2016).

Assumptions, Limitations, Delimitations

The following content discusses the assumptions, limitations, and delimitations associated with the research performed. Theofanidis and Fountouke (2018) recommend identifying and exposing assumptions, limitations, and delimitations as a necessary exercise for enhancing the quality of research studies and providing greater integrity and legitimacy to results.

Assumptions

Assumptions “are essentially issues, ideas or positions found anywhere from the beginning of the study design to the final report that are taken for granted and viewed as reasonable and widely accepted” (Theofanidis & Fountouke, 2018, p. 160). Theofanidis and Fountouke (2018) claim that research commonly contains ingrained elements related to assumptions and bias.

The initial foundational assumption of this research study was that participants would respond truthfully and without reservation or bias when replying to questionnaires and interviews during the data collection phase of the study. This assumption commonly exists in qualitative research studies that incorporate such data collection methods that cannot be precisely duplicated, monitored, or specifically verified (Theofanidis & Fountouke, 2018). Coleman

(2019) contends research produces the most meaningful results when participants perceive the inputs as valuable and anonymous.

A second assumption was that participants involved with the research would be knowledgeable regarding the leadership styles and strategies of HEIs and would agree that contemporary dynamic environments influence existing conditions. Coleman (2019) stresses the importance of soliciting qualified participants to garner relevant and valuable research results that answer complex qualitative research questions. The author affirms that participant experiences and opinions must be respected and considered valuable to accomplish best research outcomes (Coleman, 2019).

Limitations

Communicating the limitations of a study allows researchers to expose possible weaknesses of the research (Theofanidis & Fountouke, 2018). Typically, limitations reflect elements of the study outside the researcher's control that restrict methods and findings (Theofanidis & Fountouke, 2018). Theofanidis and Fountouke (2018) assert that the inherent nature of qualitative research lends itself to limitations due to researcher involvement, subjective analysis, ethical considerations, and the pursuit of emerging trends.

Unfortunately, the timeframe for the study provided a limitation as research data garnered was based on participant experience with current conditions despite the acknowledgement of rapid change and uncertainty as an element of the problem. Due to the dynamism of environments and increased complexity created by unpredictable factors, contemporary circumstances possibly yielded data requiring modification to the results of this study (Theofanidis & Fountouke, 2018). In the case of this study, the COVID-19 pandemic likely created social and financial conditions coinciding with the timeframe of this study that will

impact findings for future reference. Despite an uncertain and rapidly changing future, the researcher pursued adaptability and flexibility in design, keeping an open mind to shifting and emerging outcomes. Future research will be helpful for overcoming results impacted by time limits and study conditions.

A second limitation was limited access to information due to the relatively small geographic location that could be reasonably included in the research. The limited physical scope of the study was likely not sufficient for considering unique qualities of individual HEIs and may not provide comprehensive results for adaptable leadership within the entire higher education industry. Theofanidis and Fountouki (2018) acknowledge that the nature of limited geographical sampling may constrict findings. The researcher expressly revealed the geographic limitations and concedes the scope, encouraging future researchers to perform similar studies with increased sample sizes or to target other specified geographic locations.

Delimitations

Establishing delimitations provides researchers with an opportunity to intentionally create boundaries. Khan (2017) notes dynamic changes in environmental conditions uniquely impact the higher education institutions due to the industry's complicated membership composition. Hilbun and Mamiseinvili (2016) claim dynamic and complex environmental conditions in the higher education industry demand strategies of competition and sustainability that threaten the retention of core values and mission. Dynamic environmental conditions impacting the higher education industry include student diversification, shifting populations, decreased numbers of college-age students, pressures for pursuing research to build knowledge, technological advances, shifts in resources and funding, and market pressure to increase efficiencies and effectiveness (Fumasoli et al., 2020). By expressing delimitations of the study, researchers

clearly present to the reader information pertaining to theoretical background, goals, questions being addressed, various factors included, and groups to be sampled (Theofanidis & Fountouke, 2018). Identifying these delimitation factors enables researchers to control the expanse of their studies to facilitate accomplishment of objectives and rationalize reasons for adopting certain processes and methods (Theofanidis & Fountouke, 2018).

The initial delimitation of the research study was the criteria used to select study participants. The participants selected for the research were restricted to HEI leaders. The population included only those holding formal administrative and decision-making senior and mid-level leadership positions. The population did not include governing institutional boards or external entities and individuals that may influence and shape policy and decision-making. A second delimitation was the time period. Only leaders employed by identified HEIs during the study timeframe were included. A third delimitation was classification of the HEIs. Only small private liberal arts colleges and universities were included. A fourth delimitation was geography. The study was limited to small private liberal arts colleges and universities in the midwestern U.S. The final delimitation was the research focus, which was on the topic of leadership adaptability in dynamic environmental conditions, further reduced to assess the specific impact on HEI competitive advantage and institution sustainability.

Significance of the Study

The higher education industry has experienced rapid changes in recent decades, exposing the irrelevance of outdated traditional leadership styles (Gantasala, 2015; Marquez-Ramos & Mourelle, 2016). Leaders of HEIs find themselves called to establish competitive advantage and sustainability within an industry characterized by rapidly changing and complex environmental conditions (Abreu Pederzini, 2018; Gantasala, 2015; Marquez-Ramos & Mourelle, 2016). Along

with demographic population shifts and the birth dearth in the U.S., higher education leaders confront reductions of public funding, increased global and local competition, greater consumer expectations, and an increased demand for technological advances that provide more learning options (Grawe, 2018; Miotto et al., 2020). The loss of pertinence of traditional styles and strategies in contemporary complex conditions compels college and university leaders to assume many roles and adapt to complex conditions that impact the success of their organizations (Gantasala, 2015; Marquez-Ramos & Mourelle, 2016).

This study helps bridge the gap that exists between the application of adaptability and the styles and strategies of HEI leaders. The research provides applicable biblical principles that provide foundational direction for the research and a basis for the study. The importance of leadership adaptability to HEI competitive advantage and sustainability is explained as the issue relates to leadership within business administration as a field of study.

Reduction of Gaps

This study attempted to enhance understanding of the impact of leadership adaptability in complex environments on HEI competitive advantage and sustained existence. The significance of effective bureaucratic leadership styles and strategies within the higher education industry has been established from a product-based output perspective (Gantasala, 2015). However, Gantasala (2015) points out that a shift has occurred to knowledge-based outputs, requiring a deeper exploration of the influence of leadership theories and practices. Miotto et al. (2020) assert that HEI leaders must consider the fact that they operate in a service industry and adapt their approaches to accommodate external perceptions that have been developed over time by traditional internal cultures. Unfortunately, many HEI leaders have failed to adapt their strategies to respond to market-based economies, inhibiting their institutions' ability to survive dynamic

conditions (Gantasala, 2015). In short, leaders have to address the gap between leading for tradition and leading for the future. The challenge will be balancing sustainability achieved through legitimacy of core values as noted by Miotto et al. (2020) and sustainability accomplished through embracing change.

Implications for Biblical Integration

Regarding research, Scripture asserts that “the glory of kings is to search things out” (English Standard Version Bible, 2001/2008, Proverbs 25:2). The Bible encourages Christians to pursue wisdom and deeper understanding (English Standard Version Bible, 2001/2008, Proverbs 2:2) in order to know what God intends and desires (English Standard Version Bible, 2001/2008, 1 John 4:1). Indeed, God advocates exploring “the earth” and increasing knowledge, commanding believers to “call to Me and I will answer you, and tell you [and even show you] great and mighty things [things which have been confined and hidden], which you do not know and understand and cannot distinguish” (English Standard Version Bible, 2001/2008, Jeremiah 33:2-3). These biblical principles informed the study by providing appropriate motivational basis and specific mandate for the researcher to pursue a richer understanding, to make sense of the potential failure of leaders to adapt in dynamic conditions. These principles also contributed to the qualitative nature of the study by encouraging the researcher to avoid predetermined assumptions, choosing rather to allow context and data results to form emerging insights and increased knowledge (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Mutepe, 2016).

The Bible provided a foundational perspective on research methods and practices, addressing the need to respect all participants and instructing researchers to “do to others what you would have them do to you” (New International Version Bible, 1978/2011, Matthew 7:12). Mohd Arifin (2018) notes the social nature of qualitative design and the comprehensive personal

types of information garnered increase the relevance of moral methods and principled practices in this style of research. Researchers must intentionally consider and prepare for managing possible ethical challenges during all phases of qualitative research (Creswell J., 2016).

Managing ethical challenges included seeking approval and permissions before this study began, developing respectful relationships throughout the process of the research, and reporting and publishing results with sensitivity and integrity (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Due to the social nature of a qualitative study, anticipating all ethical concerns is unlikely, calling for researchers be aware of and address unethical conditions as they present (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As noted in the Bible, “the simple believes everything, but the prudent gives thought to his steps” (English Standard Version Bible, 2001/2008, Proverbs 14:15). Reid et al. (2018) concur that complexity and unpredictability contribute to the challenge of ethics in qualitative research, requiring intentional planning and flexibility. They assert that common moral principles shaping ethical design include a commitment to integrity and selflessness and provide participants with complete freedom to consent or abstain (Reid et al., 2018). Researchers need to consider the care and keeping of the participants a priority and “do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves” (New International Version Bible, 1978/2011, Philippians 2:3). The scriptural principles cited regarding research methods and processes specifically informed the study by providing foundational guidance for respectful treatment of participants, careful procedural planning and analysis with a focus on rigor to enhance credibility, and appropriate implementation of ethical practices and processes (Mutepa, 2016; Creswell, 2016).

De Villiers (2018) asserts that religion and a belief in God continue to provide foundational principles for addressing complexity and discerning meaning in work despite

modernization and rapidly changing environments. Specifically regarding the study of leadership, biblical principles informed the understanding, pointing out that “whoever aspires to be an overseer desires a noble task” (New International Version Bible, 1978/2011, 1 Timothy 3:1). The Bible further provides cautionary advice for leaders against assuming that they have all the necessary information for success; biblical principles urge the pursuit of continuous development (New International Version Bible, 1978/2011, 1 Corinthians 8:1-2). Dik and Domene (2015) contend that individuals who perceive their work as God-given callings commit to enhancing and adapting capabilities in order to create more positive results. Scripture instructs, “Be sure you know the condition of your flocks, give careful attention to your herds; for riches do not endure forever, and a crown is not secure for all generations,” indicating the cruciality for leaders to remain attentive to changing environments to improve performance (New International Version Bible, 1978/2011, Proverbs 27:23-24). Biblical principles informed the study by supporting the concept of adapting to dynamic environments, instructing, “Do not be conformed to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (New International Version Bible, 1978/2011, Romans 12:2). Scripture also informed the study by substantiating the need to pursue new methods in complex and challenging environments: “Forget the former things, do not dwell on the past. See I am doing a new thing. . . . I am making a way in the wilderness” (New International Version Bible, 1978/2011, Isaiah 43:18-19). In regard to striving for competitive advantage and sustainability, the Bible provided foundational support for leaders to work hard (New International Version Bible, 1978/2011, 2 Timothy 2:15), perform optimally and responsibly (New International Version Bible, 1978/2011, Galations 6:4-5), and strive to achieve best outcomes for common good (New International Version Bible, 1978/2011, 1 Corinthians 12:7; Galations 5:13b) rather than selfish gain (New International

Version Bible, 1978/2011, Galations 6:8). In regard to the study topic, biblical principles informed and influenced data analysis and results addressing leadership, adaptability, change, and the pursuit of common good.

In summary, biblical principles for ethical conduct and respect of participants informed the study through the applications of relevant mandates and instructions as referenced throughout this research study. Information was carefully collected and examined to determine accuracy and goodness, implementing appropriate strategies for retaining relevant and applicable material as Scripture suggests (English Standard Version Bible, 2001/2008, 1 Thessalonians 5:21). Research questions were developed and asked in an effort to seek truth and understanding, following biblical instruction to be “attentive to wisdom” and maintain a heart predisposed to comprehension (English Standard Version Bible, 2001/2008, Proverbs 2:2). Participants were solicited and treated with respect, and their responses acknowledged with humility and gratitude. The Bible instructs, “[D]o not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others” (English Standard Version Bible, 2001/2008, Philippians 2:4). As noted by Reid et al. (2018), respecting relationship and power boundaries, and protecting at-risk participants through-out solicitation, data collection, and the reporting processes, represent critical ethical research study elements informed by biblical principles. The researcher kept in mind the following: “If one gives an answer before he hears, it is his folly and shame” (English Standard Version Bible, 2001/2008, Proverbs 18:13), and also—“desire without knowledge is not good, and whoever makes haste with his feet misses his way” (English Standard Version Bible, 2001/2008, Proverbs 19:2). Therefore, methodology and framework as impacted by biblical principles were organized and systematic to increase understanding, and honest results

were provided that have not been manipulated to align with desired outcomes and biases as cautioned against by Yin (2018).

Benefit to Business Practice and Relationship to Leadership

According to Watkins et al. (2017), “leaders who see the world through the lens of complexity, as opposed to predictably and linearly, are more inclined to probe, sense, and respond than to force comfortable, but inadequate solutions” (p.150). The authors claim a significant link exists between leaders capable of thriving in complexity and leaders possessing high levels of emotional intelligence and ethical training. Emotional intelligence and ethics provide qualities especially crucial for those operating in complex adaptive systems (CASs), whether that be an HEI or other business organization encountering dynamic environments (Watkins, et al., 2017). The study benefits the practice of business and is related to a leadership cognate by specifically addressing the impact of adaptable leadership theories and practices for accomplishing competitive advantage and organizational sustainability in dynamic environments.

Summary of the Significance of the Study

The research study performed was based on the idea that the potential failure of HEI leaders to adapt in small private liberal arts colleges and universities in dynamic environments contributes to a loss of competitive advantage and reduced sustainability of the institutions. The research filled in missing pieces of knowledge by addressing gaps between traditional HEI leadership practices and leadership demands created by contemporary environmental conditions. The research incorporated biblical perspectives that emphasize ethical practices and integrity, as well as a cognizance of God’s promise to bless anyone who “finds wisdom” and “gets understanding” (English Standard Version Bible, 2001/2008, Proverbs 3:13). Implications for

biblical integration exposed opportunities for leaders to use the research to pursue the Biblical mandate of restoration and renewal. The suggested avenue for the redemptive process was through adaptation in dynamic environments to accomplish common good for small private liberal arts institutions. The research is applicable to the field of business and expands on current literature for providing new but related considerations and understandings regarding adaptability of leadership in complex systems hampered by traditional practices.

A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

The following review of relevant literature addresses leadership concerns for institutions of higher education experiencing complex and rapidly changing environments. College and university leaders are operating in dynamic conditions that require adaptable styles and strategies for achieving competitive advantage and institution sustainability. Fumasoli et al. (2020) note that dynamic environments are a threat to foundational missions of higher education institutions as they strive to adopt strategies to improve industry position and garner additional enrollment and resources to survive. Thriving in these conditions requires a departure from traditional leadership styles and strategies steeped in bureaucratic hierarchies long employed within the higher education industry. However, Hassan et al. (2018) claim an absence of empirical research exists to support the assumption of positive impact and correlation between effective leadership and institutional success.

Business Practices

Kleinman et al. (2018) claim that business practices at colleges and universities are evolving in response to influences of neoliberalism. The authors cite competition for state and federal funding and a shift in perspective of education in terms of its return on investment and contribution to the economy as factors contributing to the exploration and implementation of

typical business market strategies (Kleinman et al., 2018). The authors assert that HEIs are experimenting with the fusion of historical academic business practices and contemporary private enterprise practices to test the impact on current college business models. Kleinman et al. (2018) suggest that contemporary HEI leaders are investigating and facilitating blended atmospheres and strategic opportunities for amalgamating academic domains with private sector businesses to combat funding challenges and demands for increased economic value accountability. The authors note many academics are concerned about the influence of marketization that is shifting decision-making focused on the value of learning to decision-making based on economic return (Kleinman et al., 2018).

Honu (2019) confirms that cuts in state and federal funding have caused many higher education institutions to adopt practices that include tuition increases to improve revenue for sustainability. Unfortunately, the rapid rise in the cost of higher education is contributing to questions of legitimacy as an investment in the future; the author notes that some colleges and universities are employing “micro-credentialing” practices, which expand curriculums to provide non-traditional opportunities to achieve educational degrees in order to attract students and reduce the impact of tuition dependency (Honu, 2019). Honu (2019) attributes the adoption of holistic business practices, which include shared governance and participative leadership, for providing the collaboration needed to coalesce external and internal environments for achieving societal education goals.

Lumby (2019) confirms that colleges and universities are adopting practices from the business industries and claims that practices associated with distributive leadership have received significant attention and gained prominence in the higher education industry. The author asserts that institutions are embracing business practices that encourage engagement, networking, and

collaboration at all levels to navigate their complex systems, balance the tension between creativity and coordination of human assets, and improve adaptability to environments (Lumby, 2019). The author contends that distributed leadership practices are a vague response to environmental dynamism and argues that more hierarchal, structured, and formal practices remain relevant in HEIs for establishing stability and achieving desired learning outcomes (Lumby, 2019). Lumby (2019) contends that bureaucratic practices have been unjustly demonized due to an association with neoliberalism, suggesting that bureaucracy at HEIs is necessary to some degree and that emerging leadership practices are actually part of a greater bureaucratic system that allows authoritative roles to be distributed to selected agents.

Gaus et al. (2020) evince that successful college and university leaders assume multiple roles concurrently to address dynamic environments characteristic of the higher education industry, acting as role models in their positions of authority and their performance strategies. The authors claim that, as a result of complexity within HEIs, relational approaches that include collaboration and shared leadership provide best practices (Gaus et al., 2020). The authors also note that best practices are evolving as a result of globalization, marketization, and the shift to a knowledge-based economy that relies on the higher education industry to produce qualified workers (Gaus et al., 2020). Gaus et al. (2020) point out that HEI leaders are particularly challenged to mobilize participation in change given the traditional context and culture of colleges and universities, but they reiterate the need to motivate followers toward mutual goals without the use of manipulation.

The Problem

Colleges and universities across the globe exist in the midst of a rapidly changing industry landscape that threatens their individual existence (Gigliotti & Ruben, 2017). Gigliotti

and Ruben (2017) contend that factors such as a shifting global economy, challenges accessing students, and increased leadership expectations contribute to the complexity of the environment. Doyle and Malcolm (2018) claim that the current nature of the higher education industry is characterized by continuous change and unpredictable outcomes. The authors confirm that dynamic environmental conditions represent catalysts for change in HEIs that demand a re-imagination of existing leadership approaches and the implementation of more nimble practices (Doyle & Malcolm, 2018). Kleinman et al. (2018) claim that shifts in funding and increased competition for financial resources create increased challenges to HEIs noting that between the years 2008-2016, spending for higher education decreased in 46 states with 26 reporting 20% reductions.

Dynamic Environmental Conditions. Gigliotti and Ruben (2017) confirm that colleges and universities are operating in increasingly complicated and rapidly changing environments, and Tomlinson (2016) confirms that neo-liberal influences are creating dynamic environments for institutions of higher education. Hassan et al. (2018) classify contemporary conditions engulfing the higher education industry as a “hyper-turbulent environment,” citing changes such as globalization and technology as challenges to HEI leadership and HEI sustainability (p. 112). Hilbun and Mamiseinvili (2016) claim that environmental conditions in the higher education industry are dynamic and complex, demanding strategies of competition and sustainability that threaten the retention of core values and mission. Khan (2017) notes that the higher education industry is comprised of a complicated membership that is uniquely impacted by dynamic changes in environmental conditions. Dynamic environmental conditions impacting the higher education industry include student diversification, shifting populations, decreased numbers of college-age students, pressures for pursuing research to build knowledge, technological

advances, shifts in resources and funding, and market pressure to increase efficiencies and effectiveness (Fumasoli et al., 2020). Tomlinson (2016) further notes that in the wake of industry marketization, students approach the knowledge acquisition experience as a financial investment with the expectation of achieving an education that provides income returns to justify the expense. Tomlinson (2016) explains how corporate influences have transformed student experiences and expectations, resulting in increased competition as students pursue the institutions that provide the greatest chance for the greatest return. Kim and Shim (2019) concur, explaining that business-style metrics applied to HEIs for the purpose of ranking provide highly accessible and often misleading information to students and parents who then use the measures as a basis for HEI choice. Unfortunately, the higher education industry does not provide true market scenarios as student investors retain some responsibility for the return on investment based on their own individual choices, values, motivations, and practices that contribute to or deter from successful outcomes (Tomlinson, 2016). Freeman et al. (2016) assert that the dynamic conditions in which contemporary HEIs must exist create pressure for leaders of colleges and universities to improve financial efficiency, innovate non-governmental sources of revenue, and decrease expenses while simultaneously increasing quality and value to stakeholders.

Population Decline and Demographic Shifts. Marques-Ramos and Mourelle (2016) note that the drop in student numbers represents a major population concern for HEIs. Grawe (2018) uses population statistics to confirm that colleges and universities will be challenged into the 2030s by deficits in college-age students necessary for fulfilling enrollment demands. Inaba (2020) points out the fact that declining student populations are a global demographic condition confronting colleges and universities internationally. The author cites low birth rates, migratory shifts, and an aging society as contributing factors to a *depopulation* of available students (Inaba,

2020). Inaba (2020) states that decreased populations most significantly impact small private colleges and universities in rural locations, placing these particular HEIs at risk of closure.

Grawe (2018) argues that the right data combined with analysis regarding demographics in the U.S. provides HEIs with a better opportunity to adapt to dynamic conditions and maintain their existence. In addition to reduced student numbers, Grawe (2018) cites the recession and high tuition costs as threats to private four-year institutions, encouraging leaders to consider new markets and increase learning flexibility. Grawe (2018) predicts that the birth dearth and migration and immigration shifts will most significantly impact private liberal arts colleges and universities in midwestern and northeastern U.S. The author suggests that survival may be dependent on HEI leaders' ability to abandon status quo methods and achieve comparative advantage by mimicking the success strategies of competitors and adapting policies in dynamic demographic environmental conditions (Grawe, 2018).

Blumenstyk (2015) confirms the challenging dynamic environmental conditions related to population and demographics, noting that the declines in the pool of potential college applicants in the United States will impact geographic areas in the Midwest and Northeast most significantly. The author forecasts the demise of liberal arts colleges and characterizes the most threatened as private, religiously affiliated, residential institutions with student enrollments between 800 and 2500. These at-risk HEIs are generally located in rural areas and concentrate on undergraduate majors in the arts and humanities, touting small class size and low student-to-professor ratios (Blumenstyk, 2015). Blumenstyk (2015) asserts that status quo leadership strategies will contribute to the demise of these HEIs and that survival will require performing comparative analysis of their peers and adapting traditional institutional strategies.

Globalization, Technology, and Marketization. Globalization, technology, and marketization are contributing to more complex environments for HEIs, requiring the implementation of adaptable business models (Marquez-Ramos & Mourelle, 2016). Gaus et al. (2020) concurs, noting that neoliberalism has infiltrated the higher education industry, and has altered traditional methods of leadership and highlighting strategies that focus on HEIs as businesses. Marquez-Ramos and Mourelle (2016) assert that colleges and universities are operating in dynamic environments characterized by complexity and rapid change, necessitating adaptation of designs and strategies to achieve institutional sustainability. Tomlinson (2016) cites the impact of neoliberalism for creating dynamic conditions, and Tight (2019) notes neoliberalism as a source of conflict within HEIs between administration and faculty. Marquez-Ramos and Mourelle (2016) also identify technological advancements as significantly contributing to environmental conditions, rendering traditional strategies and HEI leadership models inadequate for sustainability.

Freeman et al. (2016) confirm the impact of external factors such as marketization and also cite government accreditation and disciplinary organizations as significant influencers of changing HEI environments. Cheslock and Riggs (2020) write that market pressures related to competition and comparative advantage are significantly impacting contemporary pricing strategies enlisted by college and university leadership. Song (2020) asserts that market forces significantly alter the higher education industry by placing value on particular knowledge and thereby pressuring and shaping curriculum, research, and learning. Song (2020) asserts that increased influence of markets combined with reduced support from government directly impacts the practices of HEI leaders and the manner in which colleges and universities are adapting to dynamism. Although the unique context and culture of colleges and universities are

influential, Song (2020) suggests that the entrepreneurial forces of marketization are contributing to a prevalent, generalized HEI framework. In addressing the issue of how HEIs will cope, Marquez-Ramos and Mourelle (2016) assert that thriving in dynamic conditions begins by assuming the existence of unpredictability and inconsistency; similarly, Freeman et al. (2016) claim that leaders will have to guide institutions to adapt to changing conditions.

Abreu Pederzini (2018) points out that contemporary neoliberal trends are infiltrating the business models of colleges and universities, significantly impacting institutional policies and strategies. Sriwidadi et al. (2016) assert that HEIs are increasingly called to participate in knowledge-based markets competition rather than resource-based markets to achieve competitive advantage. Marquez-Ramos and Mourelle (2016) note that these elements have democratized higher education and propose implementing a quantum approach to address the results of uncertainty and complexity on the future of higher education. Khan (2017) contends that managing changes in demographics, globalization, funding, and technology requires adaptive leadership styles and strategies.

McCann et al. (2020) assert that a more sinister impact of marketization presents in the resulting attack on the academic profession. The authors claim that neoliberalism promotes a culture on college and university campuses dominated by autocratic administrations intent on applying corporate strategies (McCann et al., 2020). McCann et al. (2020) bemoan the impact on institutions of higher learning, claiming that marketization within the industry is marginalizing collaboration, inhibiting shared leadership efforts, and threatening the foundational academic histories, principles, and pursuits of HEIs. The authors passionately call for a concerted resistance to the influences of globalization and marketization and suggest that faculty form an alliance with students, who are viewed by the market-driven leaders as the consumers (McCann

et al., 2020). They propose including other support staff in the alliance to join forces in opposition of HEI senior administrators and managers who they claim have gained total control and are imposing neoliberal business models and strategies that threaten the academic and cultural heritage of higher education institutions (McMann et al., 2020).

Traditional Leadership Styles and Strategies. Dumas and Beinecke (2018) believe that traditional models of leadership are ill-equipped and inadequate for addressing complexity and dynamism characterizing contemporary organizational environments. Doyle and Malcolm (2018) concur, citing that emerging trend in the higher education industry demand an evolution in leadership models and strategies that have historically implemented change objectives through top-down strategies. They claim that traditional models be reimaged to address rapidly changing conditions and improve institutions' agility and ability to adapt (Doyle & Malcolm, 2018). While some research suggests that HEI leaders focus and adapt in response to external environments, Doyle and Malcolm (2018) propose consideration of a more internally focused leadership approach that assesses and adapts to the day-to-day operations of their internal environments as an emerging opportunity to facilitate change.

According to Bendermacher et al. (2017), traditional hierarchies situating HEI leaders centrally threaten cultures of adaptability in colleges and universities, inhibiting opportunities and capabilities for surviving dynamic environmental conditions. The authors claim that HEI leaders are catalysts that drive the establishment of the cultures on colleges and universities. They assert that higher education markets are increasingly competitive, and the authors underpin the critical function and influence of leadership styles and strategies for establishing advantage and sustainability. Bendermacher et al. (2017) also acknowledge that conflicting agendas of cultural alignment and adaptation to change exist in the higher education industry.

Latta (2020) discusses the influence of culture, noting that the interactions of institutional cultures with leadership practices restrict HEI leaders' real power to influence change and that cultural members will sanction leaders who exert power and influence deemed unacceptable by the group. Unique characteristics and situations of colleges and universities demand acknowledging that not all leadership theories are universally applicable (Latta, 2020). Latta (2020) asserts that successfully guiding colleges and universities through change requires correctly aligning the exercise of leadership power with institutions' specific culturally accepted methods. Traditionally accepted methods at HEIs include collaborative and relational practices while tactics aimed at disruption are met with resistance (Latta, 2020). The research indicates that institutional norms dictate leadership approaches and that pressure to impose change on members often results in rejection or indifference, often damaging the institutions and reducing effectiveness (Latta, 2020). However, Latta (2020) concedes that strategic outcomes necessary for institutional survival may outweigh the risk of violating culturally accepted practices and suggests that preservation of traditional ideals balanced with necessary innovation creates conditions for successful adaptation in contemporary challenging and dynamic environmental climates. According to Latta (2020), effectively adapting strategies requires transforming established practices, distinctive characteristics, and rich histories for future relevance and applications.

Traditional transactional leadership methods typically employed by HEIs limit their leaders' abilities to consider creative alternatives for improving effectiveness (Khan, 2017). Gaus et al. (2020) note generalized characterizations of HEI leaders (such as transformational, transactional, and distributive) fall short and inadequately define the true nature required of individuals leading contemporary colleges and universities. Gigliotti and Ruben (2017) point out

traditional leadership conceptions, styles, and strategies are being abandoned in exchange for developing individuals with “cross-cutting leadership competencies” who are better equipped to respond to the realities of environmental conditions (p. 101). Cheslock and Riggs (2020) note that traditional attempts to achieve competitive advantage through pricing strategies may backfire as students are discouraged to consider some institutions due to the high-listed tuition cost.

Concepts

This research is based on the concept that the potential failure of leaders to adapt is related to complexity and dynamic environmental conditions within the higher education industry (Gigliotti & Ruben, 2017; Haberberger, C., 2018; Khan, N., 2017). Gigliotti and Ruben (2017) confirm that colleges and universities are experiencing rapidly changing and complex environmental conditions that increase complexity and require an adaptation of institutional leadership concepts, styles, and strategies. Haberberger (2018) notes the complications associated with adapting leadership to the demands of modern-day dynamic environments while simultaneously maintaining core values and objectives of a truly liberal arts education. According to Khan (2017), institutions of higher education are significantly influenced by dynamic environmental conditions, and the fast-paced changes create challenges for adapting traditional leadership styles and strategies.

This research is also based on the concept that the potential failure of higher education leaders to adapt is related to the loss of competitive advantage and reduced sustainability of small private liberal arts colleges and universities (Cheslock & Riggs, 2020; Hilbun, A. & Mamiseinvili K., 2016). Cheslock and Riggs (2020) confirm that intense competition between universities and colleges is increasing and suggest a key to sustainability is for leaders to adapt to

dynamic environments through pricing strategies. Hilbun and Mamiseinvili (2016) assert that the failure of leaders to adapt has more significance on loss of competitive advantage and sustainability than the dynamic conditions.

Dynamic Capabilities. Uhl-Bien and Arena (2018) claim that dynamic capabilities provide organizations with a means for reconfiguring capabilities to adapt to change and define dynamic leadership capabilities as abilities to discern positive and negative circumstances, capitalize on opportunities, and sustain competitive advantage by manipulating, exploiting, and transforming organizational resources. The authors assert that although traditional success strategies are important and necessary, they are no longer adequate for organizational sustainability and dynamic capabilities significantly influence the adaptability of organizations (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018). Critical elements of dynamic capabilities that contribute to adaptability include knowledge development, idea formation, concatenation of ideas and processes, and transformation (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018). Uhl-Bien and Arena (2018) confirm that leaders who employ dynamic capabilities promote engagement in conflict and connection and enhance adaptability in their organizations.

HEI Competitive Advantage. Abreu Pederzini (2018) explains that competitive advantage means something different for HEIs than it does for typical business organizations, especially when it comes to private colleges and universities. Cheslock and Riggs (2020) note that quality is difficult to establish in the higher education industry, and leaders employ a variety of tactics to improve comparative advantage within increasingly competitive environments. Abreu Pederzini (2018) notes that HEIs are often measured by rankings rather than profits, and their missions involve multi-faceted pursuits of research, teaching, public interactions, and collaborations with various industries and businesses (Abreu Pederzini, 2018).

Kim and Shim (2019) confirm that the infiltration of neoliberalism has influenced the categorization of students as consumers and encouraged the implementation of corporate-style metrics applied to rank colleges and universities. The readily available information, further assisted by improvements in technology, enables prospective students and their parents to easily access rankings, which play a critical role on perceived comparative advantage, to perform juxtaposing analysis of HEI options (Kim & Shim, 2019). Unfortunately, Kim and Shim (2019) assert that the rankings often provide a tainted perspective, and the correlation is insignificant between HEI rank and the students' personal experience. The authors also claim that liberal arts colleges (as distinguished from larger, public research universities) are often misrepresented in this process (Kim & Shim, 2019). Kim and Shim (2019) note that students are not the only ones being misled by rankings. They caution HEI senior leaders against employing rankings as a source of comparative analysis with peer institutions due to minimal information regarding educational quality and individual experience and learning (Kim & Shim, 2019). Kim and Shim (2019) reveal some resistance from liberal arts HEI leaders to participate in ranking surveys in the past due to the insignificant link between rank and quality and inaccurate reporting; however, despite the fact that the characteristics and strengths of their unique institutions are not well represented, many have capitulated to neoliberal marketing pressures. One probable upshot for leaders of liberal arts colleges and universities attempting to establish competitive advantage may be the opportunity to fill out the information void of the rankings by emphasizing core characteristics and the types of experiences and learning quality offered (Kim & Shim, 2019).

Miotto et al. (2020) confirm that dynamic environments and increased competition caused by globalization and shifting demographics are creating challenges for establishing sustained advantage. The authors note that HEIs operate in service industries where opportunities

for competitive advantage are uniquely influenced by both external perceptions and internal cultures. Abreu Pederzini (2018) confirms that new levels of consumerism within the higher education industry demand an emphasis on methods for increasing competitive advantage. The authors assert that increasing advantage and accomplishing sustainability require legitimizing organizational existence by creating value and meeting expectations. Fumasoli et al. (2020) claim that institutions of higher education will have to become preoccupied with strategic positioning to improve competitive advantage and overall sustainability. Abreu Pederzini (2018) emphasize the critical role leaders play in leading organizations to establish reputations and legitimacy that are key factors for increasing competitive advantage and achieving sustainability.

Sriwidadi et al. (2016) found that the impact of leadership on sustainable competitive advantage is not an automatic by-product of personal capabilities but relies on a leader's strategies for managing the knowledge environment. Whereas the role of leaders is considered critical, the types of advantage being pursued in contemporary environments have increased competition among private HEIs and have changed from resource-based to knowledge-based, demanding an adaptation of strategies and styles (Sriwidadi et al., 2016). The authors note that dynamic capabilities, which include adaptability, directly influence the sustainable competitive advantage of private HEIs where leaders are able to create value not being created by their competitors (Sriwidadi et al., 2016). Heaton et al. (2020) note that leaders who manage academic entrepreneurial activities and strategically assign resources to support and enhance these activities establish competitive advantage for their institutions (Heaton et al., 2020). Sriwidadi et al. (2016) claim that leaders must directly interact with faculty to monitor performance and manage the knowledge resources of private HEIs in order to increase competitive advantage and sustainability.

Tight (2019) addresses the interactions of leaders and academics as they appear to disagree about managing institutions for sustainability in dynamic environments. Tight (2019) points out that the introduction of an economic and free market by leadership into colleges and universities is rarely considered positive by faculty. Neoliberalism, which is widely influencing both policies and procedures of HEIs, often creates conflict between institutional leaders and their academic counterparts (Tight, 2019). Adopted by leaders as a necessary model for adapting to dynamic environments in order to establish institutional advantage, the marketization of higher education is resisted by academics who hold diligently to traditional intellectually motivated pursuits of knowledge not dependent on producing quantitative performance and results (Tight, 2019). Whereas leaders embrace forms of neoliberalism as a source of sustainability, academics feel compelled to resist, claiming that associated methodologies create competition between departments vying for resources and ultimately undermine sustainability by eroding critical core characteristics of the institution (Tight, 2019).

Complex Adaptive Systems. According to Kershner and McQuillan (2016), HEIs qualify as Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS), which they describe as an amalgamation of interdependent and diverse elements that operate on various levels throughout an organization, interacting and transforming in response to changing contexts. Tsai et al. (2019) concur that HEIs qualify as CASs composed of interdependent actors requiring multi-dimensional leadership to create adaptable cultures for embracing change and innovations while simultaneously maintaining operational control. The authors assert that through the process of interaction, the multiple skewed components of the CAS must function and learn from each other, adapting to each other to produce strategies and processes that are not necessarily predictable. Rosenhead et al. (2019) confirm that complex adaptive systems exist where individual and interdependent

components represent unfixed organizational elements that must interact cohesively to achieve shared goals and adapt based on learned behaviors and attitudes resulting from interactions with each other. The authors note that dependency, competition, and relationships between agents produce unique attributes and behaviors, making it difficult to create models within complex systems. Makinen (2018) affirms, claiming that CASs are spaces for participants to join forces in garnering experiences, understanding, and skills to successfully accomplish common objectives. Research performed by Kershner and McQuillan (2016) indicates the importance of CAS leaders creating disruption to facilitate transformation necessary for institutional sustainability. Cheslock and Riggs (2020) assert that contemporary environmental conditions further increase the complexity of the contexts in which HEIs exist.

Complex Adaptive Leadership. Watkins et al. (2017) claims that complex adaptive leadership (CAL) is an emerging methodology that differs from traditional leadership paradigms by placing emphasis on the ability of leaders to succeed in certain contexts rather than how they interact with followers or the specific characteristics they possess. CAL requires capabilities associated with leader adaptability, emotional intelligence, and critical thinking skills that lead to pattern identification (Watkins et al, 2017). Watkins et al. (2017) claim that leaders who embrace CAL styles and strategies develop transformational cultures focused on adaptation in complex environments. The authors note that CAL also demands leaders to share control, network with others, and empower their followers to better adapt to changing conditions. Kodama (2019) notes that leaders who embrace CAL drive dynamic interactions between the often-conflicting actors and processes of innovation and operation. According to Kodama (2019), complex adaptive leadership eliminates traditional barriers to progress and strives to quickly implement viable innovations as they emerge from organizational interactions.

Sensemaking. Abreu Pederzini (2018) notes the infiltration and significant impact of free market capitalism on private HEI environments and points out that typical indicators of market-based competitive advantage are difficult to apply. The author asserts that this challenge results because colleges and universities are all striving to achieve the same sources of advantage and many are non-profit, rendering financial indicators less relevant (Abreu Pederzini, 2018). Many HEI leaders realize that their institutions must engage in activities beyond learning, research, and retrospect to achieve sustainability in contemporary changing environments (Heaton et al., 2020). In this scenario, Abreu Pederzini (2018) identifies the important role of leaders in making sense of environmental changes, claiming that environmental fit is critical. The author further asserts that institutions must have leadership with the capacity to assess, adapt, and adopt entrepreneurial strategies to better achieve sustainability.

Leadership sensemaking requires participation in assessing activities focused on external environments that result in increased understanding and the revelation of growth opportunities (Heaton et al., 2020). Heaton et al. (2020) that claim perusing environmental conditions, prioritizing pertinent opportunities, and assigning the appropriate resources constitute critical sense-making capabilities required of HEI leaders. Fumasoli et al. (2020) affirms that managing external pressures and strategically positioning educational institutions is often determined by the perceptions and interpretations of leaders and decision-makers regarding external environmental factors. In cases where leaders are not able to correctly interpret environmental conditions, institutions cannot adapt to changes and do not achieve alignment with their environments (Fumasoli et al., 2020). Successful sensemaking enables leaders to analyze HEI fit within their external environments, capitalize on opportunities generated by good fit, and perform comparative analysis against other successful institutions (Abreu Pederzini, 2018).

Small Private Liberal Arts Colleges and Universities. Haberberger (2018) asserts that colleges and universities claiming to be liberal arts educators are at risk of closure because they have lost their distinction due to market pressures coercing them to provide more result-driven, career-oriented vocational learning to survive. Cheslock and Riggs (2020) confirm that private sector colleges and universities are especially affected by comparative analysis that occurs due to market pressures related to competition and pricing. The authors contend that private liberal arts leaders may strategically list higher prices and grant greater financial aid awards to make implications about the quality of their programs and students to increase advantage (Cheslock & Riggs, 2020). Haberberger (2018) contends that liberal arts institutions must find ways to establish value through distinctive offerings that provide more than traditional claims of creating “wise citizens” (p. 1053). Attaining competitive advantage and institution sustainability will demand that liberal arts schools reclaim their value and distinction by adapting materials to reflect a return to philosophy (Haberberger, 2018). Haberberger (2018) suggests that liberal arts HEIs abandon first-year core classes aimed at exposing students to various majors, and instead provide year one materials that provide students with a foundational sense of self so that they are better able to choose and pursue vocations that align with who they are and what they are called to do. For leaders of liberal arts universities, these notions provide consideration and direction for participating with faculty in knowledge management that shapes curriculum to maintain a distinct liberal arts value.

Hilbun and Mamiseinvili (2016) confirm that changing economies and demographic shifts create challenges for HEIs attempting to achieve competitive advantage. Hilbun and Mamiseinvili (2016) contend that establishing organizational adaptability strategies is critical to survival in dynamic environmental conditions. They assert that internal factors significantly

impact organizational adaptability and HEI leaders who are able to establish shared meaning and purpose are better able to create adaptable cultures for their organizations. According to their research, leadership styles and decision-making are largely responsible for organizational adaptability capable of responding to dynamic environments, particularly at small, private, residential liberal arts colleges and universities.

Inaba (2020) indicates that demographic declines in student population numbers create obstacles especially for small private colleges and universities in rural locations. The author's research, which focuses on depopulation conditions in Japan, provides insight for other small private HEIs as similar conditions are forecasted around the globe (Inaba, 2020). Inaba (2020) suggests that methods for surviving student deficits and avoiding closure include the development and diversification of new curriculum, vertical and horizontal mergers with other educational institutions, campus relocations, and take-overs by local authorities. The author indicates that small size, single faculty, and lesser ranking represented common elements of HEIs that succumbed to closure (Inaba, 2020). Inaba (2020) further exposes junior colleges and private four-year institutions without a niche market or comparative advantage as those at highest risk.

Theories

Esen et al. (2020) assert that although corporate leadership is a popular business study topic, scant amounts of research have been performed regarding leadership within the higher education industry, claiming that only 2% of higher education articles published in the last two decades are addressing the issue. The authors identify HEI leadership as instrumental, despite the deficit of attention being given (Esen et al., 2020). Esen et al. (2020) note that unique characteristics of educational institutions render many leadership theories ineffective and

emphasize the need to research and produce leadership theories more applicable to the industry. The authors contend that in a search to determine if HEI leaders are impacting their institutions, it is necessary to find methods with better alignment (Esen et al., 2020). Khan (2017) concurs, maintaining the need for more adaptive leadership styles and strategies to increase capabilities for assessing and planning for complex and rapid changes. Dynamic environmental conditions further exacerbate the lack of available research and expose the need for continued and increased study regarding emerging leadership methods and stronger models that contribute to the sustainability of colleges and universities.

Complexity Leadership Theory. Gantasala (2015) promotes the theory of complexity leadership as a valuable paradigm that comprehensively encompasses the multiple roles of leaders facing the demands of dynamic environments. The author asserts that CLT is valuable for addressing knowledge-based outputs such as institutions of higher education that have become more prevalent as globalization and dynamic environments have increased in complexity. The author claims that although market-based organizations have recognized the need to adapt strategies, many HEIs are steeped in traditional leadership formats that are outdated, inhibiting their ability to increase competitive advantage and innovate for enduring sustainability. Kershner and McQuillan (2016) affirm the value of complexity theory for emphasizing the varying and emerging nature of interactions in complex educational systems, and Latte (2020) claims that complexity leadership theory seizes the shards of HEI cultures to better understand and manage dynamic environmental conditions.

Khan (2017) notes that adaptive leadership theory, which is encompassed by CLT, identifies adaptive leaders as individuals who anticipate and recognize changes in their environments and contemplate optimal methods for capitalizing on the conditions. Critical

elements to adaptive leadership strategies are the ability to define changing conditions and motivate followers to learn and collaborate on new and challenging opportunities (Khan, 2017). Khan (2017) points out that this particular method may be met with resistance but is extremely useful in dynamic conditions. The author notes that the goal for adaptive leaders is to accomplish positive change for the overall good of the organization (Khan, 2017). In regard to HEIs, adaptive leaders assist institutions in accomplishing their mission and objectives through collective ideas and guidance (Khan, 2017). Adaptive HEI leaders motivate followers by understanding their values, considering individual needs and aspirations, and sharing leadership duties, activities, and responsibilities (Khan, 2017). Heaton et al. (2020) cite research that claims sharing governance offers HEI leaders an avenue for implementing more adaptable cultures and behaviors, which are critical to success in colleges and universities. The authors confirm that collaborating as a team is crucial for successfully leading HEIs (Heaton et al., 2020).

Makinen (2018) further expands on CLT, noting that the theory provides necessary structure within complex adaptive systems such as HEIs for generating behaviors that promote innovation, continuous development, and adaptive qualities within complex adaptive systems. This author asserts that implementing CLT in knowledge-producing organizations has the capability of exposing leadership styles and strategies that influence adaptability of colleges and universities. According to Makinen (2018), CLT provides a useful framework for assessing thinking across and connecting the various branches of knowledge of higher education institutions to better resolve complex problems such as dynamic environmental conditions. Makinen (2018) claims that CLT is also a practical tool for increasing understanding regarding the role leaders play in collaborative cultures.

Tsai et al. (2019) claim that innovations necessary for HEI survival in dynamic environments often conflict with status quo operations, and leaders must establish adaptive institutional cultures where creativity is encouraged and resulting changes are embraced. The authors confirm CLT as a dynamic and relational model of leadership and tout the methodology as a viable option for enabling HEIs to increase flexibility, agility, and sustainability (Tsai et al., 2019). Tsai et al. (2019) assert that CLT shifts emphasis from a particular leader to leadership behaviors, capabilities, engagement, and participation of many institution members. The authors claim that a foundational principle of CLT is distributed leadership which fosters interaction and incorporates the skills of many through bottom-up, emergent leadership (Tsai et al., 2019). Tsai et al. (2019) embrace previous research identifying CLT as a multi-faceted framework composed of elements of entrepreneurial, operational, and enabling leadership styles; they maintain that all aspects are necessary and useful for HEIs to become adaptable organizations. The authors reiterate that entrepreneurial leaders are those concerned with innovation, operational leaders prioritize stability, and enabling leaders generally manage the relationships and conflicting objectives (Tsai et al., 2019). Tsai et al. (2019) assert that HEI sustainability requires creating an adaptive and collaborative culture for managing conflicting objectives; a culture that establishes shared vision and propose by implementing CLT to adjust strategy, employ incremental modifications, and apply policy to change activities.

However, Rosenhead et al. (2019) caution against the broad application of complexity theory as a scientific approach for addressing leadership; they qualify complexity as a metaphorical tool useful for provoking transformation and making sense of experiences. The authors confirm that complexity theory has been used as an encompassing framework for the creation of leadership methods and claim that those who advocate for complexity leadership tend

to offer vague concepts based on undemonstrated research. Rosenhead et al. (2019) assert that the specific definition of complexity theory remains unclear, an ambiguity that causes confusion due to the relative meaning assigned to the term by the researcher. Research indicates that complexity theory addresses uncertainty and focuses on interactions that transform outcomes as a result of non-linear qualities; however, structures implemented still restrict complete uncertainty. The authors concede that complexity theory can be practically applied in qualitative research as a metaphorical reference to leadership practice and research, valuable for considering context and allowing for organic evolution (Rosenhead et al., 2019). Although acknowledging complexity theory as helpful for assessing environments, Rosenhead et al. (2019) reduce the value of complexity theory to creative non-quantitative studies aimed at amplifying ambiguity of problems rather than solving them.

HEI Leadership Theory. Esen et al. (2018) note the scarcity of available research regarding leadership specifically related to the higher education industry. The authors contend that although much consideration has been given to corporate leadership models, styles, and impact, the higher education industry has neglected to conduct research that provides comprehensive best practices and strategy insights for college and university leadership roles such as senior administrators, deans, and department chairs (Esen et al., 2018). Although minimal, Esen et al. (2018) note that existing research appears to have shifted in recent years away from HEI leadership focused on the individualized and personal traits to leadership embracing broader organizational perspectives, relational abilities, and transformational skills. Leadership models that have been specifically linked to the higher education industry in an age of globalization and increased responsibility for producing individuals with the skills to perform in a knowledge society include grassroots leadership, intellectual leadership, and research

leadership (Esen et al., 2018). Unfortunately, their study evinces that very little research has been performed that evaluates the impact of leadership on overall organizational effectiveness, indicating a gap in information regarding how adaptable leadership styles and capabilities may contribute to competitive advantage and sustainability in dynamic environments (Esen et al., 2018).

Makinen (2018) notes that the transdisciplinary nature of HEIs requires leaders to adopt complexity leadership theories and strategies to promote collaboration and cooperation for accomplishing common goals. The author notes that traditional bureaucratic and centralized leadership styles will be inadequate for accomplishing institutional sustainability in fast-paced and dynamic environments. Adopting complexity strategies enables higher education leaders to balance multiple administrative, enabling, and adaptive roles collectively considered necessary for survival in contemporary conditions (Makinen, 2018). Davis et al. (2015) assert that integrating adaptive systems by HEI leaders promotes cooperative group thinking from all members by implementing strategies that flatten traditional hierarchies, embrace complexity, and encourage collaboration. The authors claim that contemporary dynamic environmental conditions facing the higher education industry can be successfully navigated by leaders who manage change through adaptive methods and member participation (Davis et al., 2015).

Latta (2020) explains the interconnectedness of unique higher education institution cultures on the leadership styles and effective use of power. The author contends that organizational cultures, which define shared values and common objectives, are considered to be critical agents for producing cohesive environments (Latta, 2020). Within the colleges and universities, Latta (2020) claims that faculty utilize organizational culture as a protective precedent for intentionally stalling the implementation of new ideas and for reducing the

discomfort of adapting to change. The author identifies the power of HEI leaders as their potential for influencing the actions of followers and the influence of HEI leaders as the methods employed to capitalize on that potential (Latta, 2020).

Ambidexterity Theory. Uhl-Bien and Arena (2018) contend that dealing with complex environmental conditions demands that leaders acquire ambidextrous skills that enable them to simultaneously capitalize on current core competencies while evaluating and embracing opportunities for developing areas of new expertise. In order to be adaptable, the authors suggest finding balance between the competing demands of alignment for stability and flexibility for change. Hassan et al. (2018) contend that ambidexterity represents a critical tool for managing dynamism in the higher education industry. Tsai et al. (2019) argue that ambidexterity should extend from an individual trait to an organizational practice facilitating a balance between exploring possibilities through creative innovation and exploiting feasible options through operational stability.

Bouwman et al. (2019) evince the need for leaders to maintain control while at the same time encouraging and empowering their followers to embrace autonomy. The authors claim that teams benefit when leaders employ multiple leadership styles and strategies based on their evaluation of specific scenarios. The capacity of leaders to toggle back and forth between transactional and transformational leadership demands flexibility that is referred to as ambidexterity (Bouwman et al., 2019). Bouwman et al. (2019) assert that flexible leaders discern the best interests of their organizations and exert control when necessary while recognizing the benefits of empowering followers and relinquishing control to improve innovations associated with autonomy. Within the higher education industry, the authors claim that ambidexterity is crucial for balancing transactional control and transformational

empowerment that motivates the ongoing development of faculty. The most effective HEI leaders are those who adapt their styles and strategies to meet the changing needs of the teams (Bouwman et al., 2019).

Olk (2020) claims that ambidextrous management has become necessary for HEI leadership to navigate and adapt their institutions to withstand contemporary challenges to survival. The author sees ambidexterity in colleges and universities occurring when institutions capitalize on core capabilities and resources while striving to achieve innovation and transformation in dynamic environments through the accumulation of new capabilities and resources. Private colleges dependent on enrollment and tuition for their financial sustenance consider ambidextrous methods for enhancing the educational experience of current students while simultaneously pursuing more radical changes associated with transformation that address the changing needs and demands of future prospective students (Olk, 2020). Research results presented by Olk (2020) show that implementing an ambidexterity approach benefits private HEIs that are tuition dependent and limited to one geographic because it allows them to be both resilient to changing conditions and transformation in their offerings.

Constructs & Variables

The construct of this study is provided by the broad concept of adaptability. The overarching topic is focused on the adaptability of actors related to this study, namely senior and mid-level leaders of small private liberal arts colleges and universities who develop and implement strategic planning and decision-making. Senior leadership in the research included individuals holding positions such as presidents, provosts, vice presidents, and C-level titles. Mid-level leadership included positions such as deans, directors, and faculty chairs.

Organizational actors in this multi-site study included competing small, private, liberal arts colleges and universities.

Independent variables in this research study included leadership styles and dynamic environmental conditions that are related to external forces and internal institution culture and worldview. Mitigating variables included size and geographic location of the institutions and ethical orientation, while dependent variables were institution competitive advantage and sustainability.

Adaptability. Kodama (2019) asserts that adaptability is the most critical concern for organizations hoping to successfully manage and thrive in contemporary dynamic and brutally competitive environments. The author claims that adaptability is necessary at all levels of an organization and is key to accomplishing the balance of conflicting innovation goals for growth and efficiency objectives for sustainability (Kodama, 2019). Kodama (2019) contends that leaders who adopt a holistic approach for establishing an adaptable organizational culture harness the potential to use dynamic processes to bring stability to dynamic environments. In addition to style, Kodama (2019) claims other important leader elements include personality, relationship and interactions with followers, and degree of organizational commitment.

Leadership Styles and Strategies. Hilbun and Mamiseinvili (2016) also note the importance of style and indicate that stakeholders consider leadership style more crucial to the success or failure of an institution than the environmental conditions creating the challenge. Kahn (2017) asserts that leaders at colleges and universities must abandon traditional perspectives typically employed by higher education institutions and embrace adaptable strategies to better assess and plan for environmental changes as they occur. Laud et al. (2016) notes that as competition and complexity increase, adapting traditional roles, skills, and

established attitudes becomes more critical for organizational leaders. The success of leaders in dynamic environments depends on their ability to modify their personal strategies and apply their knowledge to changing contemporary conditions (Laud et al., 2016).

As Tomlinson (2016) notes, simply holding colleges and universities to higher standards of comparative advantage does not negate individual performance accountability, creating urgency for implementing adaptable strategies for HEIs attempting to navigate dynamic marketization within the industry. Traditional learning pursuits fade as the marketization of higher education replaces the inherent value of attaining knowledge with the future value of employment goals (Tomlinson, 2016). HEI leaders must understand and adapt to the shifting roles and expectations of students as power shifts from their institutions as providers to the students as consumers (Tomlinson, 2016). Students as co-producers of their own education focus on more individualized results and more actively participate in creating their own experiences (Tomlinson, 2016). College and university leaders typically apply flexibility to processes and offerings to remain competitive as higher education becomes a positional good for which value is determined by how institutions compare with each other (Tomlinson, 2016). Opportunity exists for leaders who recognize students as investors, consumers, and co-producers to contribute to educational experience and increased satisfaction through student-driven leadership and knowledge production (Tomlinson, 2016).

Kershner and McQuillan (2016) contend that accomplishing sustainability in educational institutions requires a shift from traditional transactional leadership styles to transformational strategies that promote decentralized authority. Kershner and McQuillan (2016) note that traditional school structures are characterized by centralized leadership that limits autonomy and the ability to respond to change. Alternatively, the authors suggest that leadership strategies

focused on promoting team building and participation enhance an institution's ability to adapt to dynamic environments. Bendermacher et al. (2017) concur, claiming that HEI leaders are most effective when they are interactive, share leadership responsibilities, and are able to assume multiples roles within the institution. Fumasoli et al. (2020) agrees and touts adapting institutional business models and internal designs as critical activities to achieve HEI sustainability even though demands of the external forces may conflict with traditional positioning strategies.

Freeman et al. (2016) assert that leaders are responsible for organizing and motivating institutional followers to actions that align with institutional mission and goals. The authors contend that accomplishing this objective requires leaders with broad perspectives who are able to adapt themselves and their organizations to dynamic internal and external conditions, actively participating in the knowledge management of their institutions (Freeman et al., 2016). Freeman et al. (2016) claim that it is critical for HEI leaders to work alongside those developing academic programs to ensure institutional alignment and sustainability based on resources, priorities, competition, and politics. Makinen (2018) agrees and points out that traditional bureaucratic leadership strategies are ineffective in contemporary dynamic environmental conditions and asserts that a more relational and interactive style is required. The author asserts that creating a collaborative and flexible institutional culture demands a balance of administrative, enabling, and adaptive leadership strategies. Traditional top-down leadership styles thwart adaptable methods, but entrepreneurial strategies and directly engaging with institution members enhances overall adaptability according to Makinen (2018).

Dumas and Beinecke (2018) claim that dynamic environmental trends have become the norm, and leaders should assume they will have to adapt to unexpected and turbulent conditions.

They further suggest that new change leadership methods should incorporate and focus on the people involved rather than the action of the change. The authors encourage leaders to consider shifting emphasis to motivating and inspiring *people change* that involves empowerment, shared decision-making at all levels of participation, and the development of a culture that addresses people's ability to adapt (Dumas & Beinecke, 2018). Dumas and Beinecke (2018) specifically cite *Servant Leadership* as a method incorporating humility and strength to create vision, values, and strategies for navigating change through shared power, assisting others, developing members, and providing resources. They propose leadership styles that loosen control and allow for the intentional existence of increased uncertainty, disagreement, and chaos to be moderated with active involvement, spirited debate, and communication that creates shared understanding. They assert that leadership styles and strategies that apprehend and perceive change, emphasize service, capacitate self-leadership, and consider all stakeholders will engage organizational members and facilitate the organic growth of adaptability (Dumas & Beinecke, 2018).

Heaton et al. (2020) reveal that most non-research colleges and universities maintain traditional hierarchal structures rather than flatter models. Creating collaboration between departments and disciplines involves disrupting the opinions and strongly held practices of faculty who prefer specialization and vertical structure (Heaton et al, 2020). Kershner and McQuillan (2016) also propose creating disruption of status quo systems to spawn adaptive change, claiming that successful adaptation requires HEI leaders and their institutions to continually assess deep-rooted assumptions. The authors assert that growth and sustainability of HEIs requires adaptive leaders who create disequilibrium and promote a perpetual process that demands collective and consistent assessment of status quo procedures and assumptions.

According to Heaton et al. (2020), leaders of colleges and universities are responsible for establishing the contexts conducive to change.

Dynamic Environmental Conditions. Creating cultures that embrace change may impact institutions' ability to navigate dynamic environmental conditions. Khan (2017) asserts that adaptive styles of leadership are holistic, and flexible approaches for managing complex conditions are more appropriate for HEIs because they enable institutions to assess distinct changing situations and choose strategies based on reality rather than historic status quo assumptions. Doyle and Malcolm (2018) propose a disruption of current strategies in favor of a more agile and distributed leadership approach that employs dialog to better assess situations of constant change and manage the motion. Kodama (2019) concurs that a holistic leadership style, occurring at all levels of an organization, is necessary for addressing dynamism in contemporary markets, calling for a dialectical approach that provides opportunities to examine and discuss juxtaposing objectives and ideas to increase adaptability in rapid change conditions. Filho et al. (2020) also propose that holistic styles and strategies are necessary as dynamic conditions task HEI leaders to engage their organizations in triple-bottom-line practices for financial, societal, and environmental accountability. The authors identify important qualities for leading HEIs in contemporary conditions as being inclusive styles and systemic analysis capabilities, as well as important skills such as the ability to strengthen through adaptation, coach and inspire, collectivize stakeholders, and provide a vision for the future (Filho et al., 2020). Filho et al. (2020) also note the importance of leadership development at all levels of the institution, including management, faculty, and students, suggesting the enhancement of skills through methods such as networking, mentoring, and providing feedback.

Heaton et al. (2020) assert that HEI leaders must advance beyond the act of administration and engage in knowledgeable management in order to successfully guide colleges and universities hoping to have greater influence in contemporary environments. The authors claim that the act of administration alone is only a moderately important role primarily engaged in oversight; leaders need to expand their impact through the implementation of more dynamic capabilities. According to Heaton et al. (2020), surviving and thriving in complex and competitive environments requires entrepreneurial leadership intentionally aware of environments, adept at responding to opportunities, capable of driving institutional growth, and intent on continuous development with a focus on promoting adaptable behaviors. The authors assert that HEI leaders hoping to accomplish sustainability and improved performance for their institutions demand confronting change, charting a course for the future, and empowering and motivating people to conform to new objectives and directions for success. Adaptable leaders who manage dynamism well immerse themselves in multiple roles for handling complexity, strategic and financial planning, human resources, decision making, and problem resolution. Heaton et al. (2020) identify sensing, seizing, and transforming as three specific dynamic capabilities crucial to HEI leader success in contemporary dynamic environments.

Mousa et al. (2020) concur that leaders are instrumental in setting new directions for their institutions, arguing that leaders must become more adaptive in order to pilot their organizations in dynamic environmental conditions. The most adaptive organizations are those that motivate followers to embrace change by strategically creating learning cultures (Mousa et al., 2020). Mousa et al. (2020) assert that leaders who most effectively combat resistance to change and establish adaptive organizational environments are those that model and dispense flexibility, optimism, perseverance, and strong ethical values.

Related Studies

Several other studies have been performed that relate to the topic of HEI leadership as impacted by the environmental conditions of the industry. Hassan et al. (2018) assert that a relationship exists between HEI leadership and HEI success; however, HEI leadership has been inadequately addressed and research remains scant. The authors performed a study specifically targeting the effectiveness of higher education leaders and the critical factors impacting performance (Hassan et al., 2018). Although focused on business schools and business education in the public sector, the results provide universally applicable insights to HEIs, indicating a need for visionary leaders equipped with styles and strategies that garner follower acceptance and support (Hassan et al., 2018). Hassan et al. (2018) claim that leadership styles and strategies significantly impact the overall success of HEIs; they assert a need for leadership development that encompasses mid-level leaders such as deans, recognizing the impact of individual leadership styles on the effective performance of the institution.

Inaba (2020) performed related research on the impact of declining populations on small private colleges and universities located in rural geographies. The author found that these types of HEIs were more susceptible to student depopulation and provides insights on options for adapting in order to survive (Inaba, 2020). Inaba (2020) suggests that small private colleges and universities develop new curriculum and departments and establish a presence in niche markets to meet dynamic labor force demands and limit competition with similar institutions. The author also identified vertical mergers with primary and secondary educational institutions as a possible means for securing numbers of potential future student populations (Inaba, 2020). Another result of the author's research indicated that horizontal integrations and mergers between HEIs might be beneficial when a large university with a good reputation is able to merge with a small

institution that fills a niche market, and also that mergers between small- to mid-sized universities in rural and suburban areas could prove fruitful (Inaba, 2020). Solutions related to relocation of campuses as a survival technique offer more potential for Japan due to the geography and small physical footprint of private HEIs in that country as the suggestions for local take-overs also seem to be unique options for the local culture (Inaba, 2020). However, Inaba's (2020) research provides useful understanding to leaders of small private colleges and universities regarding options for avoiding closure through securing niche markets, avoiding reliance on highly competitive disciplines, and establishing good reputations.

Schulze and Pinkow (2020) applied elements from multiple leadership models, including transactional, transformational, dynamic capabilities, ambidextrous, and enabling, to the study of organizational adaptability in the management consulting industry. The authors confirm the existence of increased complexity and dynamism in the contemporary markets of all industries and claim that the impact demands improvements in organizations' ability to adapt to rapidly changing conditions (Schulze & Pinkow, 2020). Schulze and Pinkow (2020) define organizational adaptability as the capacity of an organization to identify and acknowledge the need for transformation and promptly pursue opportunities in the midst of dynamism. The authors further assert that leaders are responsible for developing adaptability cultures and capabilities crucial to the survival of their organizations (Schulze & Pinkow, 2020). They describe enabling leadership as a style that incorporates ambidextrous skills and suggest that leaders employ these capabilities to encourage and actively manage intentional engagement in conflicts arising out of the natural tension between innovation and operations (Schulze & Pinkow, 2020). Schulze and Pinkow (2020) use previous research studies to support contentions affirming that senior leaders act as a key catalyst for establishing adaptable organizations capable

of surviving environmental dynamism. Their results suggest that adaptable leadership best practices incorporate ambidextrous skills, create opportunities for members to connect for the purpose of engaging in conflict and communication, establish diverse teams to intentionally incorporate different perspectives, and foster unity by providing multiple avenues for connecting and team-building (Schulze & Pinkow, 2020). The authors reveal that leaders fail to establish adaptable organizations when they neglect to adequately internalize external developments, develop adaptable skills in organizational members, create adaptive spaces, and fully embrace theories of distributed leadership (Schulze & Pinkow, 2020). Schulze and Pinkow (2020) assert that implementing leadership ambidexterity and adaptability to balance entrepreneurial innovations and operational structures provides the key to establishing organizations capable of sustainability in dynamic environments.

Gaus et al. (2020) performed research related to HEI leadership, specifically addressing the nature of college and university leaders in contemporary environments influenced by neoliberalism. Their research employed Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenology to apply context to typical and generalized characterizations of HEI leadership such as transformational, transactional, and distributed (Gaus et al., 2020). Gaus et al. (2020) note the multi-dimensional and evolving nature of HEI leadership and assert that the position has assumed a more relational aspect in recent years. The authors contend that blended application of control and interaction provide the best context for defining the particularity of leaders and managing the complexity in the higher education industry (Gaus et al., 2020). Gaus et al. (2020) propose a new model for HEI leaders, dubbed neo-transactional leadership, that provides a modified transactional methodology acknowledging the need to fuse relational styles with management strategies capable of understanding and navigating environmental dynamism.

Anticipated Themes

Potential themes and perceptions of the study, which the researcher anticipated would emerge, were related to the common experiences and challenges of individual HEI leaders working at similarly characterized institutions. Likely themes were related to contemporary dynamic environments and changing leadership roles for incorporating disruption, managing knowledge, and determining balance to accomplish objectives. A goal of the study was to develop a deeper understanding of the problem in order to increase discernment and improve perceptions that may lead to innovative solutions.

Balanced Approach. Mobilizing followers to participate in common objectives in rapidly changing environments provides HEI leaders with unique challenges that require balanced approaches and styles (Gaus et al., 2020). Gigliotti and Ruben (2017) assert that contemporary HEI leaders must become ubiquitous, embracing broader perspectives and adopting multiple personal and professional strategies for leading their institutions. Gaus et al. (2020) contend that the sustainability of HEIs in contemporary dynamic environments requires balancing relational leadership styles with business management techniques. Hassan et al. (2018) notes the influence of business-styled management techniques on contemporary HEIs and confirm that the resulting conundrum leaders confront when attempting to perform leadership and management responsibilities demands a balanced approach.

Enabling Leadership. Schulze and Pinkow (2020) note the ability of enabling leaders to establish adaptive organizational cultures where members are encouraged to engage in the tension arising out of the conflicting goals of organizations in dynamic environments. The authors contend that enabling leadership combines ambidextrous skills and responsibilities to bridge the gap between transactional operational leadership and transformational entrepreneurial

leadership and creates adaptability throughout the organization, crediting earlier research performed by Uhl-Bien and Arena (2018) as foundational support (Schulze & Pinkow, 2020).

Adaptive Space. Kodama (2019) describes adaptive spaces as informal places to address the tension between conflicting objectives of creativity and efficiency. The author claims that adaptive spaces facilitate adaptability of organizations and members by intentionally creating conditions for converging opposing goals and objectives in order to spawn and expand new ideas (Kodama, 2019). Adaptive spaces, as incubators of conflict resolution between exploration of ideas and exploitation of capabilities, orchestrate opportunities for integrating innovation into operations (Kodama, 2019).

Organizational Adaptability. Results of a study performed by Wang et al. (2017) confirm that dynamic environments expose an increased need for leaders to focus efforts on creating adaptable organizations with adaptable members. The authors' research suggests that transformational leadership practices along with the appropriate individual employee traits collectively accomplish member adaptability and, by default, organizational adaptability (Wang et al., 2017). The researchers identified the most adaptable individuals as those who believe in their own ability to remove barriers and overcome problems (Wang et al., 2017). According to the authors, adaptable members benefit organizations by employing behaviors that embrace change, capitalize on dynamic conditions, proactively prepare for the future, engage in skill development, build networks, pursue resources, and confront challenges (Wang et al., 2017). Wang et al. (2017) also contend that adaptable individuals adopt essentialist practices for prioritizing demands and minimizing unnecessary demands in order to engage in work that maximizes advantages of change and achieves personal growth and performance objectives. Creating organizations that adapt to dynamic environments requires leaders to facilitate and

enhance the inherent desires and practices of these types of followers (Wang et al., 2017). Wang et al. (2017) claim that the collective effort is successful when leaders challenge the status quo, create a vision for needed change, and motivate their followers through practices such as mentoring and coaching, providing support, and exhibiting confidence in individual abilities. However, Wang et al. (2017) notes their research reveals that establishing organizational adaptability is inhibited by some organizational cultures and the degree to which individual members identify with their firms. Their study indicates that individuals who highly identify with their organizations possess personal values, goals, and norms that closely align with the company, creating barriers to motivating increased individual adaptability (Wang et al., 2017). Wang et al.'s (2027) findings also show organizational employees who are able to substantiate the legitimacy of the work they currently do remain less inclined to adapt despite leadership efforts at transformation.

Leadership Development. Gigliotti and Ruben (2017) note that despite the popularity and prevalence of leadership development in multiple other professional arenas, the higher education industry has been delinquent in applying this practice. The authors contend that employing leadership development is critical to the future of HEIs and that implementing such programs creates a more cohesive community, retains talent, exploits potential, and contributes to a more effective institution (Gigliotti & Ruben, 2017). Gigliotti and Ruben (2017) go on to evince the importance of expanding individual understanding, skills, and reflective capabilities to develop better leaders from within. The authors suggest offering faculty and staff programs that increase knowledge of the industry environmental conditions, leadership models relevant to higher education, communication, and leader styles and strategies in addition to various other administrative topics (Gigliotti & Ruben, 2017). The authors further suggest addressing issues

through development that blends knowledge and actions, embraces both vertical and horizontal leadership strategies, bridges the gap between unique academic disciplines, and facilitates collaboration to maximize the efficient use of human and knowledge resources (Gigliotti & Ruben, 2017).

Hassan et al. (2018) confirm the importance of continuous leadership development within HEIs, specifically targeting mid-level leaders such as deans who can be incorporated into the management structure as a useful method for bridging the void between senior level administrators and the rest of the HEI community. The authors claim that the nature of effective leadership is difficult to specifically identify and measure; however, developing leadership skills such as planning, budgeting, and problem-solving broadens the capabilities and goal compatibility of leaders at all levels, positively impacting overall HEI success (Hassan et al., 2018).

Related to leadership development, Sayler et al. (2019) specifically address the transition of HEI deans and associate deans from their faculty positions into more administrative roles. Saylor et al. (2019) claim that deans and associate deans represent a valuable leadership resource for HEIs in an era of shared and distributed leadership accompanied by a dearth in HEI mid-level leadership due to baby-boomer retirement. The authors reveal that 75% of the associate deans in their study were selected from faculty positions by the institutions to serve in their current roles. However, despite the value of this potential leadership pool, the HEIs invested little effort in preparing and equipping these individuals from unique and various disciplines for their newly acquired responsibilities (Sayler et al., 2019). The authors confirm that roles of associate deans are morphing as more responsibilities related to department curriculum, funding, and accreditation are trickling down from deans (Sayler et al., 2019). Transitioning from teaching to

administration represents a significant shift in focus from HEI internal environments to a broader perspective that encompasses external conditions (Sayler et al., 2019). Sayler et al. (2019) note that, unfortunately, only about 35% of associate deans surveyed have a desire to advance into dean or provost leadership positions, and many prefer to return to teaching. The authors suggest that HEIs can improve preparedness for the shift from faculty to administration by providing continuous development in leadership skills such as decision-making, strategic thinking, and risk-taking, along with encouraging participation in mentoring relationship, networking, conferences, and workshops (Sayler et al., 2019). However, the transformation from teaching to administration also requires individuals who are willing and capable of adapting within their institutions to assume new responsibilities, acquire new skills, develop new relationships, embrace accountability, and accept ramifications in order to become instrumental on HEI leadership teams (Sayler et al., 2019).

Holzweiss et al. (2019) contend that contemporary expectations placed on HEI leaders to navigate change, risk, and relationships require senior administration members to adapt their functional capabilities, decision-making techniques, personal and self-management styles, and their impact on institutional cultures. Colleges and universities desire leaders skilled in financial management, strategic planning, theoretical application, and critical thinking while simultaneously insisting that individuals be collaborative, communicative, and skilled in relationship management (Holzweiss et al., 2019). The authors argue for more comprehensive and iterative leadership training that permeates entire institutions, enabling influence of all individuals including educators, staff, and administrators (Holzweiss et al., 2019). Holzweiss et al. (2019) suggest implementing experiential learning methods such as mentoring,

apprenticeships, and job shadowing administrators to better equip individuals for the multi- and complex role of HEI leader.

Discovered Themes

Several themes were discovered that enhanced and built on those anticipated. Discovered themes, which emerged largely as a result of personal interviews, included ideas about facilitating leadership adaptability, achieving leadership adaptability, and determining the existence of unique elements that may contribute to SPLA leaders' ability to adapt to their corresponding HEI's adaptability. A review of the literature regarding these discovered themes exposes multiple academic authors referring to various works of Ronald Heifetz as an early seminal contributor to adaptive leadership and adaptable organizations (Bagwell, 2020; Boylan & Turner, 2017; Fernandez & Shaw, 2020; Nelson & Squires, 2017).

Facilitating Leadership Adaptability. As anticipated, achieving adaptability requires intentionally creating an environment that facilitates these capabilities for both individuals and organizations (Boylan, 2017; Schulze & Pinkow, 2020). Although this theme is related to the idea of adaptive spaces as described by Schulze and Pinkow (2020), a deeper understanding of what elements are necessary to facilitate adaptability at specifically SPLA institutions in the higher education industry was exposed. Boylan and Turner (2017) note that accomplishing adaptability at complex organizations demands leaders establish conditions that facilitate adaptable capabilities of leaders and institutions.

Commitment. Northouse (2016) points out that adaptive leaders are committed to helping their followers and organizations adjust to challenges and change. Bagwell (202) claims that as adaptive leaders facilitate relationships, collaboration, and group problem-solving, they create commitment of members to each other and enhance institutional adaptability. The behaviors and

activities of leaders are the focus of adaptive methods rather than the personal characteristics of leaders (Northouse, 2016). However, whereas research results indicated the need for a strong commitment to organizational core principles and people as necessary for adaptability, Boylan and Turner (2017) point out that commitment should not translate into rigid adherence to long-term goals and the execution of plans.

Communication. A critical first step toward facilitating adaptable behaviors in people and organizations is drawing members' attention to the issues that need to be addressed (Nelson & Squires, 2017). Clear and frequent communication with everyone involved delivered through multiple media has been identified as a leadership best practice during periods of uncertainty and rapid change (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020). Nelson and Squires (2017) also express the importance of establishing safe spaces for open communication of individual perspectives and ideas. Boylan and Turner (2017) also emphasize the need for open communication and "the candid exchange of information" to accomplish the collaboration necessary for fostering adaptable individuals and organizations (p. 191). Bagwell (2020) notes the importance of connecting members socially to make sense of change and uncertainty, and to develop individual adaptability.

Consistency. Northouse (2016) points out that not all issues qualify as adaptive challenges; it is important for leadership to be consistent in identifying and managing various types of problems. Although adaptive challenges require adaptable and innovative solutions, Northouse (2016) contends that they often involve the value systems of followers and core principles of organizations; the research results indicate that remaining consistent to core values provides stability and encourages adaptability in followers. Facilitating adaptability in organizations may also require leaders to provide protection of certain elements and people from rapid or unnecessary change (Northouse, 2016). Specifically for educational institutions,

Bagwell (2020) asserts that HEI leaders will need to consistently remain focused on the learning objectives of their institutions to increase the ability of their members to adapt to rapid change.

Achieving Leadership Adaptability. Nelson and Squires (2017) claim that traditional leadership theories are inadequate for addressing the complexity and dynamism educational organizations experience. The authors contend that adaptive methods and strategies are necessary for leading educational organizations characterized as complex adaptive systems (Nelson & Squires, 2017). Bagwell (2020) asserts the need for contemporary research that investigates the impact of various methods of adaptive leadership on issues caused by dynamism in the education industry.

Strategic Planning. Fernandez and Shaw (2020) contend that colleges and universities that employ traditional leadership styles are at a strategic disadvantage when dealing with adaptive challenges. Overcoming complex issues with adaptive methods requires strategies for examination and assessment of carefully gathered and interpreted information (Nelson & Squires, 2017). Leaders with adaptability capabilities often need to distance themselves from individual challenges in order to garner a larger perspective and plan strategically (Northouse, 2016). Bagwell (2020) notes that leaders need to involve more members to innovate creative methods and plans in response to dynamism in the educational industry. Boylan and Turner (2017) imply that strategic plans need to be less rigid and that the execution of plans must be flexible in order to respond and adapt to complexity and uncertainty. Fernandez and Shaw (2020) assert that when a leader's strategic vision is well-aligned to organizational mission, confidence is instilled in stakeholders during periods of dynamism.

Alignment. Nelson and Squires (2017) assert the importance of alignment when managing the tension necessary for adaptable practices. The authors note that alignment can be

difficult to achieve when diversity of those involved is also desired to accomplish necessary change (Nelson & Squires, 2017). Northouse (2016) asserts that adaptive challenges, which are not easily defined or resolved, demand leaders who are able to mobilize organizational members to achieve positive outcomes.

Development. The complexity and rapid change in many industries demands that organizations employ persons equipped with adaptability capabilities in order to navigate the dynamism (Lan & Chen, 2020). Lan and Chen (2020) assert that adaptability can be developed in individuals at work by leaders who are inspirational, motivational, and supportive, and who provide necessary resources for adaptability development. Boylan and Turner (2017) contend that leaders are responsible for creating adaptable environments and must intentionally and actively foster and facilitate adaptability in other leaders and in their organizations.

Adaptability Elements. Other elements impacting the adaptability of higher education leaders at SPLA institutions, which were specifically identified in this research, included the size and location of the institutions and the optimism of the leaders.

Size and Location. Fernandez and Shaw (2020) stress connection and the development of trust as critical leadership practices for enhancing adaptability of members. These dynamics are more easily achieved at smaller institutions. Shared leadership methods were also identified as instrumental in creating adaptability and may be more easily employed at smaller colleges and universities (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020).

Optimism. In discussing individual adaptability, Boylan and Turner (2017) contend that it “is a mindset and a cognitive ability” that involves intuitive and critical thinking skills along with relational and social capabilities (p.186). Results of the research study indicated that, in addition to these characteristics, optimism was also a mindset common to adaptable leaders interviewed.

Summary of the Literature Review

The literature review for this study attempts to examine the lack of adaptable leadership styles and strategies at small private liberal arts colleges and universities and the impact on competitive advantage and institutional sustainability. Consequently, academic literature related to higher education competitive advantage and sustainability concepts, as well as leadership theories and methods in dynamic environments, have been reviewed and summarized within the literature review section.

Specifically, scholarly literature was reviewed regarding the definition of conditions and challenges impacting HEI leaders and threatening the survival of small private liberal arts colleges and universities. In so doing, the literature review identified unique characteristics and contemporary disruptive environments creating complexity within the higher education industry, and the irrelevance of historic traditional leadership styles and strategies.

Additionally, literature related to various leadership theories and methods was reviewed to explore opportunities for addressing dynamic environments. In the end, foundational elements for implementing leadership adaptability to improve competitive advantage and sustainability have been assessed and considered.

Research results provided by Wang et al. (2017) regarding individual and organizational adaptability may provide insights to HEI leaders for hiring particular personalities and for disrupting culture traits that increase resistance to change. Honu (2019) confirms that leading HEIs successfully in dynamic environments requires leaders willing to engage in strategic risk-taking, experimentation, and re-imagination of strategies with unpredictable outcomes. Olk (2020) confirms that private HEIs dependent upon tuition for financial survival in contemporary dynamic environments are challenged to be both resilient and adaptable. Conditions related to

decreased enrollments, geographic locations, and changing stakeholder demands and expectations demand an ambidextrous approach to maintaining the strength of core offerings while transforming programs to appeal to new audiences (Olk, 2020). Sustainability will rely on the ability of adaptable HEI leaders to pursue ongoing exploitation of core offerings and on the exploration of new methods that keep pace with the rapidly changing educational landscape (Olk, 2020).

Summary of Section 1 and Transition

Section 1 provides the foundation of the qualitative case study and details the significance of the study for current and future research. This section identifies and establishes the problem addressed in this study, namely that a potential lack of adaptability in dynamic environments of HEI leaders contributes to a loss of competitive advantage and institutional sustainability. The purpose of the study, which explores leaders' ability to adopt and employ adaptable methods that impact their strategies and influence institutional advantage and sustainability in dynamic environments, is established in this section. Additionally, rationale is provided regarding the selection of a qualitative research method with case study design based on a constructivist worldview. Assumptions, limitations, and delimitations associated with the study have been revealed, and the emphasis of the study was exposed by research questions, definition of relevant terms, and the establishment of Complexity Leadership Theory as a conceptual framework.

Section 1 has been concluded with the addition of a comprehensive probe into academic and professional literature pertinent to the research study. Section 2 of the study builds on the foundation provided by the initial section; discussed are the methods and design of the research,

the participants selected, the collection and analysis of data, and the procedures for insuring reliability and validity of the information garnered.

Section 2: The Project

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative case study research design was to add to the body of knowledge by increasing understanding and exploring reasons leaders do or do not adapt in the higher education industry during dynamic conditions and the impact leader adaptability has on institution competitive advantage and sustainability. The problem was explored through an in-depth study of leadership styles and strategies in dynamic environments and its impact on competitive advantage and sustainability at small private liberal arts colleges and universities.

The use of a purposive case study achieved increased understanding by implementing sampling methods that solicited current leaders at two or more small private liberal arts schools in an effort to increase analytical benefits (Yin, 2018). The participants were considered and recruited by the researcher from areas within the midwestern United States, specifically the regions of southeast South Dakota and northwest Iowa.

Role of the Researcher

The role of the researcher was to collect data relevant to the issues and populations being studied, consider the ongoing interplay between the problem being addressed and the information garnered, and assess results in order to develop understanding (Yin, 2018). Actions taken by the researcher included reviewing organizational documents and records, soliciting participants for the research, conducting personal interviews with participants, developing and soliciting questionnaire responses from participants, observing actual behaviors and conditions, assessing multiple sources of data, compiling information, garnering participant feedback

through member checking, evaluating results, and reporting findings. The researcher was responsible for asking high-quality questions, listening to participant responses, making fair interpretations of material gathered, remaining open to emerging scenarios, understanding the pertinent topics, and maintaining high levels of ethical standards and processes throughout the study (Yin, 2018).

Related to actions taken by the researcher and to the greatest extent possible, personal bias was avoided through the implementation of bracketing. The researcher engaged in intentional bracketing to set aside preconceptions and personal bias regarding the topic to increase objectivity of the research and focus on participant experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A contemporary study performed by Dorfler and Stierand (2020) confirm the quality and relevance of research findings are improved with well-performed bracketing practices. The researchers claim that the idea of abandoning one's own experiences completely is unrealistic and propose increasing awareness of researcher subjectivity and preconceptions in order to exploit and incorporate intuitions and previously informed perspectives (Dorfler & Stierand, 2020). They suggest enhancing researcher reflexivity in the interview, report compilation, and analysis phases by incorporating additional analysis between the interviewer and a co-researcher to eliminate bias. In addition to soliciting peer review, personal researcher experience with the topic and institutions was not discussed when performing interviews. (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The role of the researcher in this study included collecting data, evaluating information, and reporting results with integrity, respect for participants, and adherence to ethical standards. In qualitative case studies involving relational and personal interactions between the researcher and participants, special consideration must be given to the inherent possibility of polluting results with personal bias. Yin (2018) cautions that unintentional influences of reflexivity can

taint research results and asserts that an awareness of this issue is critical for overcoming the probable negative impact. Yin (2018) emphasizes the importance of implementing intentional and high-quality bracketing practices.

Research Methodology

A flexible qualitative multiple case study method was applied to the study of leadership within the higher education industry. The flexible design allowed for the application of multiple theories and the possibility for themes to emerge. The qualitative nature gave voice to the real-lived experiences of leaders and gathered their perspectives of the reality of contemporary conditions. The multiple case study enhanced data collection and addressed triangulation concerns by implementing multiple sources of information to strengthen interpretive analysis and legitimize conclusions.

Discussion of Flexible Design

Creswell (2016) notes that quantitative research employs fixed design that develops a hypothesis prior to the study with the objective of proving the applicability and relevance of a particular theory through a focus on statistical and measurable results. Flexible design, in contrast, allows for exploration and research adaptability in gathering and discerning meaning by listening and adjusting to the responses of participants (Mutepa, 2016). Mutepa (2016) asserts that flexible designs allow researchers to assess and develop understanding throughout the process by creating an interdependence between parties and giving a voice to participants in order to determine meaning and allow results to evolve rather than establishing desired outcomes before the study. A flexible design was appropriate and necessary to allow for adaptability of emerging ideas in the research of leadership style of higher education institutions due to complex and rapidly changing environmental conditions.

Discussion of Qualitative Multi-Case Study Method

Qualitative research methodology requires the researcher to develop understanding and interpretations by embedding themselves in the environments and real-lived experiences of the participants and situations being studied (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Qualitative methods generally use open-ended exploration of complex situations or phenomena to garner information from multiple sources in an effort to discover and report themes that emerge (Creswell, 2016). Qualitative methods were appropriate for studying higher education institutions characterized by complexity and for performing research that explores leadership styles and strategies from the perspectives of the participants attempting to navigate current and actual dynamic conditions. Rather than identifying and enhancing a single theory as in quantitative approaches, the use of qualitative methods allowed for implementing and expanding on multiple current leadership theories and approaches simultaneously as the complexity of conditions and variables demands.

Case study methods enabled the researcher to develop comprehensive explanations and analysis of one or more cases in order to establish more thorough understanding (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Creswell and Poth (2018) note that case study research data is collected from various sources such as surveys, observations, interviews, documents, and records and analyzed in the context of particular case(s) being studied. Case study method was appropriate for acquiring accurate data and for studying and understanding the impact of contemporary dynamic environmental conditions on current leaders at various leadership levels at particular higher education institutions. Including multiple leaders and HEI systems bounded by time, geographic location, and institutional type identified the cases, enhanced data collection, and allowed insights to emerge regarding the influence of various cultures and organizational structures on leadership styles and strategies.

Discussion of Methods for Triangulation

Triangulation involves establishing the commonality of information collected from various data sources to determine the strength of study results, support the legitimacy and relevance of research measures, and to ensure accurate interpretation of data (Creswell J., 2016; Yin, 2018). Creswell and Poth (2018) point out that using multiple cases and sources allows for more expansive data collection and the emergence of understanding from cross-case perspectives, a practice that enhances triangulation objectives. Yin (2018) concurs, claiming that source multiplicity strengthens case studies and addresses triangulation concerns by obtaining an array of information origins as verification when collecting data and engaging participants in reviewing draft reports of information as details are compiled. True triangulation occurs when all sources of evidence, such as documents, records, interviews, and observations, produce similar results (Yin, 2018). A flexible qualitative case study approach, which applied several theories and incorporates interviews with several leaders and various documents from multiple higher education institutions, was appropriate for accomplishing triangulation objectives in the study of leadership in the higher education industry.

Summary of Research Methodology

A flexible qualitative case study methodology was appropriate for exploring the topic of dynamism and leadership in the higher education industry. The qualitative approach enhanced understanding by garnering experience and insights from participants, and the flexible design allowed for the evolution of ideas and theories based on responses and data. Implementing a collective, instrumental case study method increased understanding of issues regarding adaptability and dynamism and will expand opportunities to consider various influences of individual personalities and organizational cultures on findings. Including multiple levels of

leaders as cases within each unit and several sources of data in a multi-site case study provided triangulation to the flexible design, lent legitimacy to the study, and strengthened the relevance of assertions made by the researcher.

Participants

Senior and mid-level leaders at small private liberal arts colleges and universities represented the types of individuals eligible for inclusion in this project. The definition of a leader in this research study encompasses participants at various levels of formal institutional leadership, including presidents, vice-presidents, C-level positions, deans, directors, and chairpersons who influence the development and implementation of strategic planning and decision-making in contemporary environments. These types of participants were preferable for developing a deeper understanding of the individual perception of dynamism in the industry environment and to assess various leaders' contributions to survival of the institution.

Population and Sampling

As asserted by Yin (2018), replication logic is more applicable and appropriate for multiple-case study research than sampling logic. Yin (2018) notes that when complex topics, such as the impact of adaptable leaders in the higher education industry, are being addressed and a few institutions are selected for research, the small number of cases cannot feasibly be expected to represent the larger population. When considering a few cases such as two leader groups within separate institutions as was done in this study, Yin (2018) suggests striving for literal replications that challenge proposed applicable theories. Insights provided by Yin (2018) regarding population and sampling for multiple-case study research were applied.

Discussion of Population

The eligible population included a subset of the 1,300 institutions within the higher education industry categorized by the National Center for Education Statistics as four-year, degree-granting, private non-profit, liberal arts colleges and universities (Hussar et al., 2020). Refining this group, the specific population was reduced and included small colleges with fewer than 2,500 students, classified as private with religious affiliations, four-year degree-granting, self-identified as liberal arts education (SPLA), and located geographically in the midwestern United States. HEIs possessing these characterizations were appropriate for the research study because they have been identified as a population vulnerable to dynamic environments and because they provided an appropriate source of potential data for studying the impact of adaptable leadership styles on dynamism in the desired target group (Haberberger, 2018; Inaba, 2020). The common characteristics of these colleges and universities distinguished them from other HEIs, focused the research on the issues of interest, and provided results intended to benefit this specific population. The size of this eligible population in the midwestern states of Iowa and South Dakota is approximately 30 higher education institutions; however, as Yin (2018) indicated, the complexity of the topic inhibited adequately representing all of the population institutions with just a few cases. In order to maintain an appropriate number of cases for a multiple case study as per Creswell and Poth (2018), only 2-3 of the institutions meeting the necessary criteria were considered as the population from which to source research samples and pursue the supposition that leaders who are adaptable contribute to institutions' ability to survive dynamic environmental conditions.

Discussion of Sampling

The samples for the research included individuals and groups of individuals as described and drawn from the identified population as participants but not necessarily representatives of the entire group who were the focus of the research.

Sampling Method. Purposeful sampling, which incorporates criterion, homogeneous, and critical case strategies, was the method employed for the research study. The collective, multi-site cases involving several participants chosen with the instrumental intent of focusing on issues of adaptability in dynamic environments offered ample opportunity and rationale for purposeful sampling. Criterion strategies ensured that sites meet minimum criteria characterizing a particular segment of the higher education industry while homogenous strategies provided opportunities to focus on various leaders and leader groups as cases within each site unit. Critical case strategies allowed application of generalized details regarding dynamism and adaptability to the research units the cases are within. Creswell and Poth (2018) note that purposeful sampling, which may incorporate the use of more than one strategy, provides possibility for garnering diverse opinions regarding the issue being studied. The authors' assertion identifies this sampling method as beneficial for comprehension of individual reactions and assessments of current HEI conditions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Convenience sampling was also used based on institution availability and geographic proximity to the researcher (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Sample Frame. The sample frame was constructed through a review of the formal organizational structures of the institutions participating in the multi-site study. The list of potential participants was comprised of individuals who occupy formally identified and established positions of leadership within the college or university where they work. Therefore,

the procedure for developing the sample frame included institutional research and review to determine an appropriate pool of potential individuals to invite participation.

Desired Sample and Sample Size. Creswell and Poth (2018) stress that determining sample size is a strategically important task for qualitative research and point out the need to gather comprehensive information regarding the desired sample members. The authors encourage limiting case study research to five or fewer cases, suggesting that such a sample size will supply sufficient data for perceiving themes and performing cross-case assessments (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Yin (2018) adds that sample size in case study research often includes *discretionary judgment* regarding the level of certainty the researcher needs or wants to establish. Due to the fact that dynamic operating environments are widely acknowledged for creating organizational challenges and extensive literature exists regarding leadership significance, sufficient samples and sample size for this research study were derived from two sites with each providing multiple leaders or leader groups as cases for participation. To achieve saturation objectives, the sample size of participants consisted of 16 organizationally identified senior level and mid-level leaders participating in individual interviews.

Summary of Population and Sampling

The population for this multiple-case study research project was leaders at SPLA colleges and universities in the midwestern United States. The samples drawn from the population included various individual leaders such as presidents, vice-presidents, C-level leaders, deans, directors, and faculty chairs as senior level and mid-level cases within each of the 2-3 institutions acting as units of participation. Purposeful sampling was employed to intentionally identify and select sites that meet desired criteria with leader participants possessing a wealth of details and experience relating to the critical case issues of interest. In some instances, leader participants

were homogeneously grouped to perceive differing perspectives at various formal leadership levels within each HEI case.

Data Collection and Organization

Data collection and organization often occur concurrently within the analysis and report-writing processes; however, success of the project often relies on establishing adequate plans and processes for managing collected information in the early stages of the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Managing the data involves defining the types of information to be collected, choosing best practices and tools for garnering data, and establishing consistent methods for organizing material prior to beginning the project (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Data Collection Plan

The types of data collected included documentation, archival records, personal interview responses, and informal observations. Data collected from documentation served to provide context; identify organizational details, structures, and communication; and collaborate information from various sources (Yin, 2018). Gathering documentation occurred prior to and during field research and included searching websites, gaining access to and reviewing relevant institutional documents such as reports and interorganizational communications, and perusing publicized non-academic information such as rankings and news releases. Archival records such as statistical information provided by the federal government and the higher education industry were reviewed from public records to define and lend relevance to environmental conditions and issues. Desired candidates for the study were solicited through requests for access to various sites and the use of recruitment letters introducing the researcher and the research details to the potential participants (Yin, 2018). The invitation/recruitment letter was accompanied by an informed consent letter, which Creswell (2016) notes informs potential participants about details

of the study such as the purpose of the research, procedures regarding the collection of data, possible risks and benefits of the study, and assurances about confidentiality and the voluntary nature of the study. Invitations were followed up via email and/or personal conversations.

Creswell (2016) notes that *member checking* helps to establish the validity of the study and represents the researchers attempt to confirm accuracy of their analysis and findings by reviewing the broad summations of their interpretation of the data collected with the research participants. The researcher accomplished *member checking* by providing copies of interview transcripts to all participants and offering follow-up interviews and opportunities to affirm or repudiate researcher interpretation of data collection.

Instruments

Various instruments were used for collecting data, including an interview guide for lending structure to individual interviews and archival documentation to provide contextual information.

Interview Guides. Creswell and Poth (2018) suggest designing and using an interview guide to control and steer the direction of the social interactions between the interviewer and the interviewee(s). They propose implementing “five to seven open-ended questions” based on the intended purpose of the research to develop a richer understanding of the interviewees’ experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Creswell and Poth (2018) emphasize the importance of listening and contend that performing high-quality interviews requires interviewer skill development and practice. A copy of the interview guide used in the research has been provided in Appendix A.

Archive Data. Creswell and Poth (2018) note that review and analysis of archive data sources such as organizational records, strategic plans, and reports provides valuable historic

information for establishing context. Yin (2028) mentions that statistical data compiled and furnished by government entities or industry groups may also be useful and applicable to case study research. Official individual organizational documents that were reviewed to increase contextual understanding and establish a framework included vision and mission statements, organizational websites, organizational structure charts, and reports regarding strategic leadership policies and procedures as access was granted. These sources were included based on the proposed impact of institutional culture and leadership structures on adaptability in dynamic environments. Statistical data provided by external sources regarding relevant industry information such as population changes and market conditions was also be considered for contextual background and support of the problem being addressed.

Data Organization Plan

The organization of the research data included a written report, a description of the procedures employed, details regarding findings, and concluding comments. As per guidelines provided by Yin (2018), details regarding all data collected were organized and archived so that the information is available for review. Yin (2018) mentions computer software as a tool but also suggests a Word database as a useful method for organizing, retrieving, and reviewing raw materials collected. The Word document typically includes researcher notes, archival documents, statistical information as relevant to all cases, and a narrative of researcher insights and questions. Creswell and Poth (2018) encourage the use of digital files and the development of a consistent file naming system to ease retrieval of information. As per suggestions of Yin (2018) and Creswell and Poth (2018), the researcher used Word documents for an initial and informal recording of data collected that contain a naming system identifying such categories as types of data, the participants, and collection dates. The researcher also maintained physical files of data

collected containing researcher insights and memoing. The researcher compared files across multiple participants and developed particular findings based on contexts, interviews, groups of leaders, and documents. The researcher entered information from the Word documents and interview recordings into NVivo software as discussed by Creswell and Poth (2018) for transcription, organization, and analysis purposes.

Summary of Data Collection and Organization

Establishing plans and details for collecting and organizing data is a process critical to project success and should occur prior to beginning the research. In this study, the researcher collected and recorded multiple types of data including documentation, records, personal perspectives, and observations. The researcher adhered to established protocol, implemented an interview guide to conduct personal interviews, and collected archive data for addressing information relevant to the research questions. Data collected was organized informally into a digital Word document, and NVivo computer software was employed to transcribe and organize personal interviews.

Data Analysis

Yin (2018) contends that regardless of chosen methods, demonstrating expertise in performing high quality analysis of data is critical to social science studies. The researcher must be aware of and committed to including all evidence available and considering possible alternative conclusions while applying the data to the main focus of the study and establishing themselves as knowledgeable regarding the topic (Yin, 2018). Creswell and Poth (2018) provide useful guidance for data analysis, depicting and describing various stages of the process in Figure 8.1, The Data Analysis Spiral and Table 8.3, The Data Analysis Spiral Activities, Strategies, and Outcomes (pp. 186-187).

The archive data collected provided a contextual and structural framework for the study, identifying tradition, culture, and organizational structures impacting leadership at the individual sites. The interviews focused on eliciting individual understanding of environmental conditions facing the industry and perspectives regarding crucial higher education leadership styles. Informal observations enhanced understanding of culture, leadership practices, and interactions.

Emergent Ideas

Emerging ideas and themes were traced as they presented through the practices of reading and memoing. Creswell and Poth (2018) suggest that the compilation of data be read multiple times in an effort to develop a broad understanding. The authors advise that while reading the information, researchers concisely record thoughts and reflections with notes, sketches, and summations next to the text in order to peruse the material for emerging or common ideas (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher employed reading and memoing to organize material, identify emerging ideas, create an audit trail, establish initial codes, and enhance credibility of the research.

Coding Themes

Creswell and Poth (2018) encourage researchers to develop codes or categories based on the reading and memoing that has been performed. The authors advise researchers to begin the coding process by creating detailed descriptions of what they see within the context of the case being studied, descriptions that are especially useful in case study research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Creswell and Poth (2018) then suggest that researchers employ *sensemaking* and *lean coding* to organize and break down the data collected into five or six smaller categories of information. The authors note that the list of codes or categories will likely be expanded throughout the data review process but should ultimately be reduced again and classified into

five or six themes for manageability and publication purposes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In addition to creating detailed descriptions, Creswell and Poth (2018) assert that developing diagrams depicting the coding process and codebooks to define individual codes assists in this phase of data analysis. The researcher employed detailed descriptions of the cases and the contexts for classifying data into codes and codes into themes.

Interpretations

Developing and assessing interpretations of the data requires further implementation of researcher sensemaking and critical thinking skills to assess and cluster codes and themes into broader ideas and patterns (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Creswell and Poth (2018) identify “hunches, insights, and intuition” along with social science constructs and personal opinions as sources contributing to interpretation in data analysis (p. 195). Methods for enhancing interpretation include soliciting peer reflections of the data, creating diagrams to illustrate links, reviewing existing data and literature, and asking guiding questions to challenge assumptions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As is appropriate for conducting case studies, the researcher considered and adopted approaches for aggregating data into categories for determining themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Data Representation

Creswell and Poth (2018) describe data representation as the researcher’s method for presenting their conglomeration of the data in a palatable format. The authors indicate best approaches for case study data representation include categorical aggregation, direct interpretation, identification of patterns, and development of naturalistic generalizations that provide applicable and transferrable information. Although the authors identify various forms of representation, they suggest that useful types for case study research include detailed textual description of the case and the context, and possible implementation of visual diagrams and

illustrations (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher employed description and considered implementing tables for categories and diagrams to illustrate themes as useful for enhancing representation.

Analysis for Triangulation

Yin (2018) asserts that case study research achieves objectives for in-depth and contextual research through triangulation that facilitates the convergence of evidence garnered from multiple relevant sources. The researcher accomplished triangulation by using multiple sources of information and employing a cross-case analytical approach to look for patterns and themes when conducting data analysis. As noted by Creswell and Poth (2018), cross-case analysis in multiple case study research allows the researcher to triangulate data from various sources to expose similarities and differences and develop corroborating evidence that validates the research accuracy.

Summary of Data Analysis

Analysis of the data began in the early stages of the research study and was performed through reading and memoing. The researcher reviewed material several times to identify emerging ideas and to establish appropriate coding. The researcher categorized data and employed sensemaking skills to interpret data collected, incorporating qualified peer review when possible. The data was represented narratively and through visual literacy methods such as diagrams and illustrations when applicable and appropriate for simplification and clarity. Cross-case analysis of multiple sources provided a means of performing triangulation in the study and was used to establish a convergence of evidence. The researcher collected, organized, and analyzed all data with the assistance of a coding template and computer software as discussed by Creswell and Poth (2018).

Reliability and Validity

Reliability and validity are considered critical to rigorous research and are used to determine quality and accuracy of the operations of qualitative research study (Yin, 2018). Implementing strategies and practices for reliability and validity is crucial for establishing the credibility of qualitative research due to the social nature of the method and the reliance on researcher interpretation (Yin, 2018). Reliability of the study addressed issues concerning consistency of measures employed and was ensured with tactics for accomplishing credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. Validity of the study addresses issues regarding the accuracy of the operations and measures and can be ensured by incorporating practices such as bracketing, triangulation, and saturation.

Reliability

Yin (2018) claims that reliability reduces mistakes and bias in case study research and results when methods employed iteratively produce consistent findings. Creswell and Poth (2018) suggest that perspectives and terminology for establishing reliability and validating qualitative research are evolving to distinguish social research from quantitative research and validity testing. Four measures for judging the reliability of qualitative research include credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Credibility (Creswell & Poth, 2018)/**Internal Validity** (Yin, 2018). The constructivist qualitative case study relies on participant perspectives rendering the participants the primary source for determining credibility of the results. Therefore, as encouraged and outlined by Creswell and Poth (2018), the researcher implemented *member checking* to solicit feedback from participants in order to review data and determinations useful for establishing credibility of the research. The researcher also engaged in memoing practices to create audit trails and contribute

to credibility. Methods for enhancing credibility, or internal validity as classified by Yin (2018), may also include pattern matching, explanation building, or logic models to show cause and effect in complex scenarios. The researcher ensured reliability by performing follow-up with participants and also considered explanation and logic as useful methods for addressing reliability concerns due to the complex nature of higher education institutions.

Transferability (Creswell & Poth, 2018)/**External Validity** (Yin, 2018). Involving others to read and evaluate the research is a validation method that allows external participants to determine the degree to which the findings of the study can be generalized and are transferrable to other contexts. Creswell and Poth (2018) contend that “thick description is necessary” to ensure results are transferable between the researcher and the participants (p. 256). In enhancing transferability, the researcher was responsible for developing a thorough description of the context and assumptions of the research, and for providing ample information for the reader to determine if the findings are appropriate and applicable for other contexts. The researcher ensured reliability by creating detailed accounts of garnered data and contextual environments.

Dependability (Creswell & Poth, 2018)/**Reliability** (Yin, 2018). Yin (2018) notes that traditional objectives for reliability involved the ability to show that repeating research processes would deliver the same results over and over. In establishing reliability or dependability in qualitative procedures, researchers acknowledge uncertainty and change; they attempt to show that research findings will be influenced by dynamism. Researchers must demonstrate the dependability of study operations while accounting for dynamic scenarios, assuming responsibility for detailing the changes in the environments, and identifying the impact of the changes on the research (Yin, 2018). The researcher ensured dependability of the study by

adhering to established protocol and developing a database for documenting and recording details regarding research processes, materials, and findings.

Confirmability (Creswell & Poth, 2018)/**Objectivity/Construct Validity** (Yin, 2018).

Yin (2018) notes that qualitative research is often criticized for neglecting to establish operational measures and for the existence of researcher bias in conclusions. Creswell and Poth (2018) concur that subjectivity of the researcher has the potential to taint results and suggest disclosing personal perspectives and biases to the reader to minimize the impact. The researcher addressed objectivity concerns through strategies of reflexivity to disclose personal experiences and bias that may influence processes and interpretations. As suggested by Creswell and Poth (2018), the researcher attempted to enhance the confirmability of the study by engaging outsiders familiar with the topic to review and provide feedback.

Validity

Various perspectives exist regarding the terms and processes for establishing validity of qualitative research studies; noting the evolution of the methodology is important (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Creswell and Poth (2018) suggest that amid the changing research landscape, more focus will likely be placed on validating case study approaches; therefore, the authors encourage the implementation of several validation tactics. The researcher ensured validity by implementing *bracketing* to avoid personal bias as much as possible and *triangulation* to incorporate data and corroborate evidence from multiple sources. Despite the more specific application to Grounded Theory, the researcher applied saturation practices to the case study aimed at gathering sufficient data to fully develop the topic and perform adequate analysis of findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Bracketing

Bracketing is the practice of setting aside personal involvement and preconceptions with the research topic in an effort to concentrate on the lived experiences of the participants being studied (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Creswell and Poth (2018) note that this intentional action involves discipline to temporarily eschew personal understanding in order to maintain an open-minded and receptive evaluation of data collection results. The authors point out that researchers conducting case studies who share personal experiences typically inhibit information sharing from participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Therefore, as a technique, the researcher refrained from discussing previous personal experiences and exposures with the topic, industry, and institution in order to maximize participant contributions.

Summary of Reliability and Validity

Establishing the reliability and validity of the case study research provided consistency and accuracy to the study. Practices for enhancing validity, such as bracketing and triangulation, occurred at various stages of the data collection process and provided accuracy to the study, particularly in personal interviews. Strategies for increasing reliability, such as incorporating multiple sources and engaging in member checking, lent relevance and consistency to the research and results through the use of tools such as a study protocol and interview guide. Additionally, as suggested by Yin (2018), the researcher ensured reliability in the study by adhering to established protocol, producing and maintaining high-quality field notes, developing an organized case study database in the form of a Word file for data retrieval purposes, and linking the findings from the various sources.

Summary of Section 2 and Transition

The purpose of the study was to explore HEI leadership and to increase understanding of styles and strategies employed in dynamic environmental conditions. The role of the researcher was to engage in ethical and professional practices for performing the collection of relevant data from participants. The method of the study was a flexible qualitative multiple-case study approach intended to garner experiences and perspectives of the participants to add to the existing body of knowledge regarding HEI leadership and relevant leadership theory. Participants included multiple formal leaders and formal leader groups selected from a population composed of higher education institutions represented by two small private liberal arts colleges and universities. Purposeful sampling through criterion, homogenous, critical case, and convenience strategies was utilized to identify and garner appropriate participants for the research. Data collection methods included review of documentation and archive records, interviews, and informal observations. Practices for organizing and managing data included memoing, coding, and implementing digital formats and computer software for transcribing and recording data. Emerging ideas, results, and interpretations were represented by written text and visual literacy where appropriate and useful for understanding. Cross-case analysis of findings from multiple sources served to enhance triangulation of the data. Although multiple coders will not be utilized, the researcher made use of computer software to transcribe interviews for categorizing and analysis purposes and to improve reliability of the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher used a coding template for case study research as outlined by Creswell and Poth (2018). Reliability of the study was accomplished through member checking for enhanced credibility, comprehensive narrative for determining transferability, a database for digitally recoding data to increase dependability and reflexivity, and review to improve confirmability.

Establishing the validity of the research was accomplished through practices of bracketing to minimize personal bias, triangulation to converge evidence, and saturation to gather ample information for full development of the topic.

The methods detailed and discussed for performing the research, choosing participants, and gathering and analyzing data were employed and contributed to achieve results relevant and practical to contemporary business practices. The research as outlined produced findings that reveal the real-lived experiences and perspectives of HEI leaders at SPLA colleges and universities serving at various levels within their organizations. The results of the study as described and outlined show the effects of environmental dynamism and organizational complexity on leaders and the consequences of particular behaviors and strategies of the leaders on their institutions. Relevant findings, which are illustrated both narratively and visually in the following section, have identified multiple applications to contemporary professional business practices and have also provided insights for navigating and managing change.

Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

Overview of the Study

The research study conducted addresses leadership adaptability, specifically in small private liberal arts (SPLA) colleges and universities, and its impact on higher education institutions' (HEI) competitive advantage and sustainability. The research sought to more fully understand environmental industry conditions and their influence on SPLA leadership from the leaders' perspectives. Upon developing a greater comprehension of conditions, the study further aspired to garner the experiences, perspectives, and actions of leaders in response to the context of their positions. Several sites were identified as providing the desired population criteria. Access was requested and granted by gatekeepers at multiple sites for solicitation of leaders.

Senior level and mid-level leaders were specifically targeted for this study. Senior and mid-level leaders at enrolled sites received recruitment letters and follow-up calls resulting in sixteen personal interviews with seven senior leaders and nine mid-level leaders choosing to participate in the research. The senior leadership positions included presidents, vice-presidents, associate vice-presidents, and C-level leaders. The mid-level leaders included those holding positions of dean, director, and faculty chair. Signed consent forms were received from each individual who agreed to participate, and all interviews were conducted either in-person or via Zoom. Each participant received a copy of the interview transcription and was offered the opportunity to review and furnish feedback to the researcher regarding accuracy of the data and any necessary clarifications. Insights gained regarding elements of leadership adaptability were garnered from the interviews and the contextual information of the sites.

Presentation of the Findings

The following presentation seeks to provoke thought and increase understanding by providing a rich and thick description of leadership adaptability in the higher education industry as garnered from multiple leaders at various HEI sites (Creswell, 2016). The higher education industry is being targeted for the research because it has been identified as challenging, rapidly changing, complex, and in crisis (Gigliotti, 2020; Mitchell & King, 2018). One interviewee noted agreement, stating that higher education is “an industry right now clearly in a state of flux—maybe a state of distress” (#SL01-0009, 17:23).

In an effort to comprehend the leadership challenges and ability to navigate contemporary conditions, the researcher is employing a qualitative multi-case study that incorporates individual interviews of college and university leaders at multiple sites. The researcher consulted with a gatekeeper at each enrolled site to request access to individuals for interviewing (Creswell &

Poth, 2018). Access was granted and acknowledged in the form of a written permission letter that allowed the researcher to garner institutional information for context and invite members to participate in interviews. Individual leaders were then solicited for participation via a recruitment letter and follow-up communications. Persons willing to participate were given additional details regarding the research and consent forms for review. All participants provided the researcher with signed consent forms.

The results are based on the 16 individual interviews conducted personally by the researcher. Participants were selected based on purposeful sampling, and an interview guide was created and employed that included six open-ended questions regarding participants' leadership at their HEI (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Interviews were conducted in-person and via Zoom meetings. Multiple recording devices were used, identities and sites were masked, and backup copies were created (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Interviews were transcribed, and copies were provided to participants for member-checking purposes. Interviewees represent the two cases in the multi-case study; namely, HEI Senior Leadership and HEI Mid-Level Leadership. Senior leadership is composed of persons possessing formal titles such as President, Vice President, Associate Vice President, and Chief of Staff. The mid-level leadership case is composed of persons holding titles that include the words "Director," "Chair," and "Dean."

The population for the research includes leaders at SPLA institutions within a specified geographical region located in midwestern United States. The region can be characterized by small to mid-size cities supported by largely agricultural economies. The campuses themselves are brick and mortar, and largely residential. The physical locations provide comprehensive experiences, offering academic, athletic, fine arts, and recreational opportunities and facilities. Grounds are well-maintained properties dotted with statuary such as beloved mascots and

artwork of religious symbols that portray institutional affiliations and heritage. The sites enrolled all noted positive enrollment for the upcoming year despite documented conditions in the higher education environment.

Themes Discovered and Interpreted

The research revealed several themes among senior and mid-level leaders regarding influential factors impacting the ability to adapt to industry dynamism. Knowing what to adapt and what not to adapt was exposed as critical. The study revealed that leadership that remained unchanged and grounded in a commitment to the foundational principles, frequent and “good” communication, and consistency in execution contributed to adaptability when confronted by uncertainty and rapid change. Adapting to dynamic conditions at enrolled SPLA institutions, which are classified as complex adaptive systems, was successfully being accomplished through more flexible planning, people alignment, and intentional people development.

Facilitating Leadership Adaptability.

Commitment. The importance of leadership commitment to institutional mission and vision despite pressures to adapt was a theme identified by the research. Leaders who remain unapologetically unchanged in core foundational principles, including beliefs and practices associated religious affiliation, create security and stability for their teams. SPLA leaders participating in the research who were providing distinction for their colleges and universities, and as a result competitive advantage, were unwavering under pressure and embraced the principles of their religious “private” status not just in name but in beliefs and actions. One mid-level leader stated, “We are not going to change because we are being pulled in one way by culture or by this issue in culture. We’re going to be faithful. We’re going to be obedient to God, even if it’s hard” (ML#02-0003, 07:04).

Senior and mid-level leaders interviewed also expressed resolve to remain committed to traditional liberal arts educational objectives amidst competition from technical schools providing more skill-based and focused job training. Although leaders were involved in altering and adding programs to their SPLA curriculums, they remained focused on developing whole persons. Predictions are that individuals will have many careers in their lifetimes, and leaders interviewed assert that providing a holistic approach will prepare students for mobility. As noted by one senior leader, students may not think they need philosophy or culture or literature classes in their chosen careers, “but we know you do and we’re going to incorporate that and we’re going to celebrate that” (#SL02-0001, 15:32). Positive enrollment numbers at HEIs with these types of leaders indicate consistency and commitment are also critical to institutional advantage and sustainability.

Communication. Communication and the various components and forms was cited as crucial to the ability of leaders to adapt individually and institutionally. Leader responses indicate that involving and engaging more people at various levels within the organization in conversation increases transparency and engenders trust when making changes. Active listening was cited as necessary for building relational capital, garnering feedback, and building consensus throughout the organization. Although leaders admitted that these processes could be potentially frustrating and typically elongated decision-making, leaders who did not ignore this opportunity experienced more success in adapting and managing change.

Consistency. The need for consistency was most often noted by mid-level leaders who often act as the bridge between administration (or senior leaders) and the faculty/staff at SPLA colleges and universities. These leaders stressed the importance of not allowing political and social pressures to distract and alter critical structures. The constancy lends stability and calm to

the institutional culture and facilitates “buy-in” of proposed and implemented adapted methods and performances.

Achieving Leadership Adaptability.

Strategic Planning. New methods for strategic planning are contributing to leaders’ ability to adapt in uncertain and complex environments. Strategic planning is occurring in shorter time periods, and strategic plans are being developed based on possible scenarios informed by data. One senior leader noted that planning is situational and that it is important to be able to “pivot quickly when the information tells us that it’s a good idea” (#SL01-0009, 39:06). Also, more members are being invited to participate in the planning and implementation processes. By adapting strategic planning processes, leaders are able to garner more insight from individuals working more closely to their consumers and retain flexibility that allows them to pivot quickly in uncertainty.

Alignment. One method for increasing leaders’ ability to adapt in dynamic environments is creating alignment within their organizations. This is accomplished by several means, including instituting rigorous hiring practices, creating a supportive and collaborative culture, and, in some instances, encouraging people who don’t fit to move on to other occupational pursuits. Hiring practices intent on “maintaining mission identity” improve adaptability and involve recruiting by “searching, finding, contacting, and encouraging” like-minded people to apply (#ML02-0002, 06:39). Leaders are also able to more easily adapt when they facilitate a “genuine joy in being able to collaborate” (#ML02-0004, 21:49) with followers and encourage their people to “think about how we are functioning together” (#ML02-0005, 19:35). A more recently hired mid-level leader acknowledged the challenges a lack of alignment created, stating, “I want to be fully invested but it hasn’t happened for me” (#ML01-0012, 40:05). The hesitancy

of this mid-level leader resulted in a department team where one member “struggled to connect” and “there was quite a gulf between them” (#ML01-0012, 25:16). Attempting to “match the environment with the right kind of people” is a transformational, team-building process that required one senior leader to admit (regarding current employees) “Some of them I had to remove and replace” (#SL02-0007, 03:07).

Development. Research results indicate that another successful method for achieving improved leadership adaptability is member development at all levels of the organization. Some leader participants in smaller institutions with tighter professional development budgets indicated that this development occurs informally through peer mentoring and providing “more opportunities for a staff member or an administrator to take on more responsibility” (#SL01-0015, 27:13). Other informal opportunities for leadership development, according to participants, included serving on committees and task forces, participating in local community development programs, and “becoming active with local and regional organizations” (#ML01-0016, 23:52).

Beyond encouraging and supporting informal development, senior and mid-level leaders are able to improve the chances of successfully adapting by targeting members for potential and training them for upward mobility. Leaders involved in these more intentional methods collaborated with other HEIs, financed conferences and research for members, regularly offered on-site training from resident experts on various topics, and watched for “different people as they start growing in their role” and made “a more intentional effort to be in touch with their staff” (#ML02-0004, 41:42, 47). Whether informal or formal, the end result of people development was creating a network of individuals better equipped to adapt to rapid changes both individually and as vital parts of the SPLA institutions.

Additional Adaptability Elements. Additional and unexpected themes were discovered, including the perceived advantages of small size and Midwestern location, and the sense of optimism among leaders at SPLA institutions.

Size and Location. Senior-level and mid-level leaders at the SPLA sites enrolled noted that their small size contributed to the ability to adapt. As stated, SPLA institutions are “able to be fairly nimble” (#SL01-0015, 14:53). In regard to SPLA institutions, the word “nimble” was used by several participants who felt the smaller size of their HEIs enhanced the ability to adapt quickly. Interviewees felt that, unlike larger schools, they were more able to meet as necessary, collaborate directly with other leaders, and more easily make change happen. One used this analogy: “Big schools are the aircraft carriers and we’re the small destroyers” (#ML01-0013, 09:58). The ability to discuss and make decisions without delays typically encountered by large HEIs governed by a Board of Regents was seen as an advantage to managing change. The opinions of the senior and mid-level leaders interviewed indicated that their small institution size provides adaptability advantage over leaders at larger public institutions who deal with increased layers of hierarchy, politics, and community when attempting to make adjustments. Leaders interviewed believe that a small size better equips them to adapt by capitalizing on shorter communication chains, performing analysis of their unique situations, following data, and making necessary changes to adapt to dynamism in the environment.

In addition to their small size, the mid-western geographic location of the HEIs enrolled was also considered by leaders as an advantage. While most industry changes are being initially experienced at HEIs on the coasts, the changes are occurring less rapidly in the Midwest. The delay provides leaders at SPLA institutions in the heartland an opportunity to “see what kind of impact [a given change] had on the market before we see it come to us” (#SL02-0001). Leaders

at HEIs in the middle of the country are more able to adapt methods and performances based on actual data and observations, thus benefitting from marginally reduced uncertainty.

Optimism. The outlook for the future held by SPLA leaders is generally optimistic despite acknowledged challenges. The majority of senior and mid-level leaders involved in the study did not deny the conditions but are choosing to defy them. In regard to the high amount of pressure in the higher education industry, some challenges could be classified as “positive pressure to make higher education more accessible to more people, to make it more equitable and inclusive” (#SL01-0015, 10:22).

Representation and Visualization of the Data

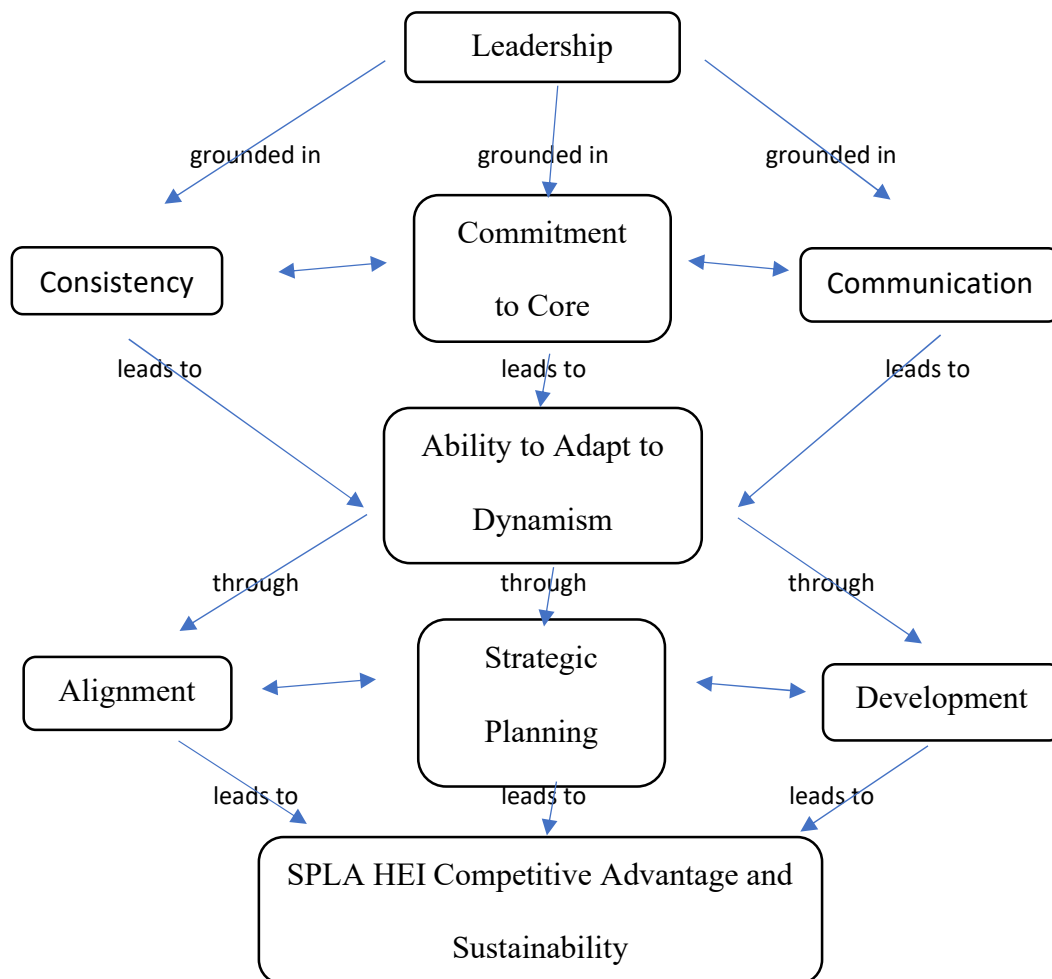


Figure 2. Visual representation of the findings

Relationship of the Findings

The researcher has explored the issue of leader adaptability in the higher education industry and analyzed the findings of the research to identify themes that directly relate to key areas of the research proposal (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As a result, a detailed understanding has emerged from studying senior leaders and mid-level leaders at SPLA colleges and universities (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The multiple cases have been bound by time, defined as the four-month period from May-August 2021: this period was utilized for recruitment of sites and participants, interviewing, transcribing, member-checking, analysis, and compilation of results. Location, which is defined as Midwest United States, was also bound as Creswell and Poth (2018) suggest is appropriate, and the data retrieved has been amalgamated in a manner that supports the various themes identified.

The Problem. The higher education industry is inundated with issues stemming from dynamic change that are creating significant leadership challenges and unprecedented pressure to adapt (Mitchell & King, 2018). As stated by one senior leader, “If you want to test your leadership capacity, you should come to higher ed” (#SL01-0009, 29:25).

Background of the Problem. The claims made by Mitchell and King (2018) articulate concerns of various academics and practitioners who recognize the dynamic conditions and extreme challenges facing leaders of HEIs, conditions and challenges requiring adaptability (Fumasoli et al., 2020). Responses to the first interview question regarding the impact of conditions on institutions, support the existence of the problem. Participants note the existence of volatile and dynamic conditions in the higher education industry that confirm the “background of the problem” as identified in the research proposal. Interviewees concur that their institutions are

being impacted by multiple environmental factors such as declining student populations, increased competition, societal and political pressures, and commodification of education.

Problem Statement. The problem being studied is adaptability of leaders in current higher education industry conditions and whether or not leader adaptability is able to impact institutional outcomes. The reality of the problem as noted in the problem statement, which claims leaders' potential success or failure to adapt styles and strategies impacts institution advantage and sustainability, is further verified by responses to the second and third interview questions. In both cases, senior-level and mid-level leadership respondents noted adjustments over the last several years in personal and institutional management processes and practices in reaction to demands of changing industry situations. Conversations with various leaders at the SPLA institutions enrolled in the research suggest acute awareness of the potential risk of lost advantage and sustainability as they anticipate predicted future challenges.

Purpose. The purpose of this qualitative case study research is to add to the body of knowledge by increasing understanding and exploring reasons leaders do or do not adapt in the higher education industry during dynamic conditions and the impact this degree of adaptivity has on the competitive advantage and sustainability of their HEIs. The institutional data gathered and the interviews conducted provided increased information regarding how leaders at SPLA colleges and universities perceive conditions, institutional practices and policies, and their personal styles to be influential to the outcomes of their HEIs.

Nature of the Study. The constructivist approach to the study allowed for the existence of multiple realities as experienced by participant leaders at various levels throughout multiple institutions. Questions regarding leadership methods and best practices to address the threats to their institutions' existence elicited a variety of personal insights pointing to the need to innovate

and adapt. Likewise, the flexible qualitative nature enabled the researcher to garner understanding and meaning from real-lived experiences and ideas of leaders rather than statistical information. The personal accounts allowed for the influence of leadership personalities, emotions, and styles to build more comprehensive findings regarding reasons leaders do or do not adapt when facing challenging environmental conditions in the higher education industry. Although several themes had been identified in reviewing the literature, the flexible nature of the study resulted in emerging ideas as participants shared and contributed to the data.

The Research Questions. Research question RQ1 attempts to understand and identify why and how leaders potentially fail to adapt. The corresponding sub questions, RQ1a and RQ1b, seek to provide a balanced perspective of how leader actions and behavior contribute to or hinder the ability to adapt. The second research question, RQ2, and the more probing sub question, RQ2a, explore the environmental conditions impacting SPLA colleges and universities, specifically seeking to generate understanding about how leaders respond to their environments. The final research question, RQ3, considers and investigates variations in leader styles and strategies. Sub question RQ3a hones in on how the potential success or failure of leaders to adapt influences competitive advantage and institution sustainability. Collectively, the research questions and sub questions address issues that contribute to a comprehensive understanding regarding leader adaptability in response to dynamism in the industry, and the impact of leader ability and willingness to adapt on institutional advantage and sustainability. The following paragraphs summarize respondents' answers to the interview questions.

RQ1. How do leaders adapt leadership styles and strategies in dynamic environmental conditions? For leaders at one site included in the study, the rapidly changing industry landscape

resulted in meetings as necessary to address alignment of practices and strategies throughout the organization: “we meet when we need to meet” (#ML01-0014, 11:16). One interviewee noted that leaders at their site were assuming more independent strategies and less collaborative styles in response to downsizing and rapid change. These leaders noted that the change intensified the need to engage in active listening, openness, connection, and communication to adapt styles and strategies. Leaders at another site engaged in more frequent and structured meetings in order to collaborate and partner together through change. Strategic planning meetings occurred more frequently to create shorter timeframes, plan for multiple future outcomes, and adjust when projected outcomes did not become the reality (#SL02-0007).

Despite similarities, leaders at enrolled institutions employed different procedures and techniques. In some instances, leaders relied on organic collaboration as needed to address changing conditions, while others engaged in intentional interactions to anticipate change. One site, according to a mid-level leader, did not “inhibit any kind of growth experience” (#ML01-0014, 20:57), while another mid-level leader noted that their site actively encouraged personal leadership development, looking for ways to “help people flourish” (#ML02-0003, 21:29).

Leaders are also able to adapt styles and strategies by creating organizational cultures willing to assess situations and change. As noted by one participant, “That’s just the way we think around here” (#ML01-0010, 11:46). For another site, creating alignment took on a more intentional and less organic nature.

RQ1. a. What leadership actions and behaviors contribute to the potential failure of leaders to adapt leadership styles and strategies in dynamic environmental conditions?

Findings indicated that adhering to traditional practices and targeting only traditional populations are actions and behaviors of HEI leaders that inhibit their ability to adapt to dynamism in

contemporary industry environments. Ignoring contemporary social topics such as diversity, equity, and LGBTQ concerns rather than taking an official stance is an example of actions and behaviors by leaders hoping to “sort of tiptoe down that middle line” rather than adapt (#ML01-0012, 01:19).

Extreme aversion to risk was said to contribute to leaders’ failure to adapt. A senior leader at another site took a more moderate approach to adjusting campus culture claiming, “Extreme risk taking with scarce resources, or being overly conservative are both dangerous places” (#SL01-0009 24:07). Risk-taking was also noted as inhibiting leadership adaptability at colleges and universities where the internal culture was—“if your board thinks that one failure and you should be gone as president, then you’re not going to try stuff” (#SL02-0007, 06:48).

Other behaviors cited as contributing to failure to adapt included this point: adopting “wait and see” policies regarding how other colleges and universities are responding to changes discourages leaders to adapt. One interviewee suggested that it would be better to “have more courage in our convictions and maybe lead rather than hold back to see what everyone else is doing” (#ML01-0012, 09:43). Engaging in excessive amounts of “blue sky” thinking was also cited as inhibiting successfully adapting because such thinking hindered necessary decision-making regarding details and immediate needs (#SL02-0007, 22:52).

Declining growth opportunities when they present themselves or waiting for invitations or mandates to develop professionally contribute to the failure to adapt in dynamic conditions. Although some SPLA colleges and universities may not have resources to fund formal professional development on a large scale, interviewees note that there are generally opportunities to “be on committees and task forces” and become “active with local and regional organizations” that are affiliated with the institution (#ML01-0016, 23:52). These types of

development are typically encouraged and supported; however, leaders who choose not to become involved deprive themselves and may, as a result, fail to adapt to changing conditions.

RQ1. b. What leadership actions and behaviors contribute to the potential success of leaders to adapt leadership styles and strategies in dynamic environmental conditions?

Creating an institutional culture composed of leaders at all levels who embrace the realities of constant change and uncertainty in the HE industry is considered critical to successfully adapting. As noted by one senior level leader, actions regarding hiring practices need to evolve “to match the environment with the kind of people that we need” (#SL02-0007, 04:04). In some instances, leader actions may involve removing and replacing people who are not interested in or capable of being part of a team in perpetual motion. Although creating a culture more comfortable with movement contributed to initially higher rates of turnover, the actions ultimately achieved a more flexible mindset among those who stayed (#SL02-0007).

The results of the research indicate that humility and flexibility accompanied by a willingness to change contribute to the success of leaders to adapt. One interviewee noted the importance of not being so committed to one’s personally held convictions: “Being guided by that level of humility is absolutely critical” (#SL01-0015, 20:21). The emphasis is that “being open to the wisdom of others” enhances the ability to adapt (#SL01-0015, 21:48).

Increasing interaction and communication was noted as contributing to success in adapting styles and strategies. Consistency focused on the well-being and experience of humans that prioritized the needs and fit of all individuals at the institutions was considered to enhance adaptability. Intentionally seeking feedback and “genuinely taking it into consideration” were noted as actions of leaders that contributed to adapting styles and strategies (#ML01-0016, 06:52). One senior leader noted that leaders at various levels within his organization were

“constantly talking” (#SL02-0007, 21:35). Interestingly, in order to improve collaboration at this same site, senior leadership was being eliminated from some meetings in order to increase focus and expedite accomplishment of immediate goals (#SL02-0007, 23:20).

Leaders find influential partners to garner support for proposed changes. According to one interviewee, “finding others to really help make your message more credible” helps break down barriers and contributes to successful adaptation of styles and strategies (#ML01-0016, 17:09). This idea encompasses actions of soliciting information from third-party consultants (enabling leaders to “make data informed decisions”) and assessing best practices based on analytics. Both actions contribute to more informed, more successful change (#SL01-0009, 19:05).

Senior leaders who participated in the study mentioned that searching for opportunities in the challenges is a behavior that contributes to adapting strategies. One claimed, “I think we don’t fail often enough,” indicating that leaders at HEIs need to experiment more with alternatives and be willing to take risks to survive and grow (#SL02-0007, 05:29). Leadership qualities and strategies conducive to navigating industry conditions, as identified by senior leaders, included maintaining a calm demeanor (#SL02-0008), respect, consistency, high EQ, good communication skills, listening, financial acumen, and an “opposable mind” (#SL02-0007).

RQ2. How do dynamic environmental conditions impact small private liberal arts colleges and universities? Every leader interviewed, whether senior level or mid-level, confirmed the existence of dynamism in the higher education industry. Conditions were described as “very challenging” (#ML01-0012, 01:19) and “very unsettled” (#SL02-0007, 01:21). When asked about the impact of contemporary industry conditions, one participant claimed, “I don’t think it’s an understatement to say that there’s a crisis in our Christian higher

ed” and that conditions have “put private Christian colleges into a very difficult situation” (#ML01-0010, 04:49).

The COVID-19 global pandemic is obviously an environmental condition with great impact on SPLA institutions. Although small colleges and universities are being challenged by multiple other pre-existing concerns, the gravity and urgency created by COVID has both added to the volume of issues and accelerated the intensity of circumstances. Although the pandemic most certainly complicated situations, a mid-level leader at one site praised the “proactive nature of leadership,” claiming that the institution was “in a better position than a lot of universities” because leaders were already adopting versatile and adaptable processes prior to the onset of COVID (#ML02-0004, 03:22).

The most noted environmental condition, prior to the pandemic, impacting small private liberal arts colleges and universities were demographic changes and the declining population of traditional college-age students available to recruit and enroll. This condition, commonly known as the “birth dearth,” represents a “potential enrollment cliff” (#ML02-0004, 03:22) caused by decreasing birthrates beginning with and generally attributed to the recession of 2008. As a result, operational budgets and workforces at SPLA colleges and universities, which are “tuition-driven to pay salaries and benefits” (#ML02-0004, 03:22), will have to take on proactive leadership styles to plan for staffing and minimizing reductions. A mid-level leader concurred that a proactive leadership style would be necessary: “Wise adjustments need to be made on the front end so that you don’t have to make harder decisions in the midst of a struggle” (#ML02-0005, 02:18). Another mid-level leader exposed the need to engage in “crucial conversations,” asking questions in the midst of a shrinking student population, about which programs were vital and which offerings needed to be eliminated (#ML02-0003, 01:37). Regarding recruitment of

students, a mid-level leader acknowledged that the birth dearth is demanding SPLA colleges and universities shift priorities to invest more time, staff, and financial resources to garner students (#ML02-0002, 04:50).

Another notable environmental condition impacting SPLA HEIs is the dominate perception that attending a private institution is not affordable. The perception of high cost of tuition has made it more difficult to recruit and enroll low- and middle-income students. One senior level leader emphasized that SPLA's must "overcome the barriers of perceived notions that private education continues to be costly" (#SL01-0011, 03:27).

Racial and gender diversity and equity concerns are additional industry conditions impacting SPLA colleges and universities. Regarding racial diversity, one participant claimed, "We're going to struggle to attract students, let alone retain them, because we don't have the resources on campus. Students of color aren't seeing themselves reflected in our staff and faculty" (#ML01-0012, 03:28). Regarding LGBTQ, an increasing number of students are questioning the stance of SPLA institutions they are considering and, for some private colleges, "the answers are not easy to give" (#ML01-0012, 01:19). Some senior and mid-level leaders noted the need to remain committed to core values while treating all with grace to address sensitive societal issues and pressures to adapt policies and practices (#ML02-0004).

Additional contemporary conditions mentioned that impact SPLA colleges and universities included "changing presidential administrations," which altered political climates and influenced the enrollment of international students. According to one interviewee, the "numbers of international students across the United States have dropped substantially because of political reasons" (#ML01-0014, 05:37). According to the interviewer, international

enrollment had decreased by 30% prior to the COVID-19 pandemic; then, as a result of the global pandemic, that number increased to a 70% decline in international students.

RQ2. a. How do leaders of small private liberal arts colleges and universities adapt leadership styles and strategies to respond to dynamic environmental conditions? One participant stated, “Leaders have made the wise and bold step of understanding that they have to take some risks.” SPLA leaders are implementing innovative systems “not bound in tradition”, asking a lot of “what-if” questions, considering the answers carefully, and then taking action because the “margin for error has really narrowed” (#ML01-0010, 08:07). There is a consensus that survival requires wise adaptations based on informed decisions: “[Leaders are] not doing anything without looking at data and they’re looking at what appears to be risk but very measured and done with a degree of caution” (#ML01-0014,08:28). Another mid-level leader concurs that leaders are implementing data plowing to adapt strategies and be more intentional about who is being recruited and what prospective students are interested in (#ML02-0002, 04:50).

For one interviewee, leadership styles and strategies had become more task-and process-oriented in order to quickly and efficiently respond to conditions. Another leader developed an increased focus on staff members, providing more tools and resources in order to support their efforts and meet their needs. This person claimed, “If the faculty are happy, the students are happy” (#ML01-0013, 18:30).

RQ3. What leadership styles and strategies at small private liberal arts colleges and universities contribute to leaders’ potential success or failure to adapt during dynamic environmental conditions? Leadership strategies noted that contribute to successfully adapting to industry dynamism included listening and calculated movement: “The good leader has to

listen, not just hear. You have to hear and listen and understand and respect all voices” (#ML01-0014, 09:28). One participant contends that developing the ability to solicit, hear, understand, and empathize with multiple experiences and opinions contributes to discernment and adaptable decision-making (#ML01-0016, 16:03).

Isolationist styles and independence inhibit a leader from successfully adapting because they are likely unaware of all the necessary information to make a change and because adapting requires support and alignment. Deeply rooted, traditional practices in higher education such as tenure, which encourages status quo performance for those who have acquired it, inhibit leaders’ ability to adapt to dynamism in the industry market (#ML01-0013). As stated by one leader participant, “When you become tenured, you don’t have the same performance goals” and the incentive to participate in change is decreased (#ML01-0013, 33:20).

A leadership strategy identified that contributed to adaptability was creating a team of individuals that were in alignment with overall goals. Alignment is accomplished both by “searching, finding, contacting, and encouraging” qualified individuals to hire who fit institutional mission, and by training and developing existing members of the organization (#ML02-0002, 06:39).

RQ3. a. How does the potential success or failure of leaders to adapt leadership styles and strategies during dynamic environmental conditions contribute to competitive advantage and sustainability at small private liberal arts colleges and universities? As stated by one leader, “The leadership decisions that we make always, always will impact the human element, and when those leadership decisions impact the human element in a very rich and rewarding and favorable way, everybody gains—the institution does better, but ultimately people do better” (#ML01-0014, 28.47).

Leaders who successfully adapt to the commodification trends in the higher education industry focus on “understanding the competition and what your customer wants” (#ML01-0013, 19:54). Embracing and adapting to a business model in education enables leaders to address and alter strategies for consumer expectations, value proposition, cost, and competition in order to improve competitive advantage and sustainability. Successfully adapting to commodification increases the focus on the students and contributes to program changes, greater efficiencies, and attempts at cost containment.

One senior leader noted that during the recent COVID-19 pandemic, it became necessary to adapt the preferred situational leadership style to a more directive style leadership. This style became critical for addressing rapid and unpredictable changes as they were occurring. While the leader emphasized the preference was a more collaborative style, “situations on campus were changing by the day—sometimes by the hour—and it wasn’t conducive to call a meeting” because decisions needed to be made quickly (#SL01-0009, 54:45). In such crises scenarios, the success or failure of a leader to adapt their styles significantly impacts institutional outcomes.

Although the success of a leader to adapt their styles and strategies may contribute to competitive advantage and sustainability, participants also emphasized a need for consistency when addressing competition for students, even when working with fewer resources and facilities. One participant indicated that competitive advantage was achieved by being “consistent in our messaging and the experience students have when they come here” (#ML01-0016, 05:47). Another mid-level leader claimed that leaders who behaved inconsistently when it came to institutional mission and allowed dynamic environments to cloud mission identity are detrimental to overall institutional goals for advantage and sustainability (#ML02-0002, 06:39).

One interesting question, which arose regarding leadership strategies that impact outcomes, was, “When should entrenched people leave to make way for the new because the world is changing so fast?” (#ML01-0010, 28:32). And, in an effort to create institutional sustainability, how do leaders ensure that they are passing on their responsibilities to individuals well-prepared to confront and manage challenges and dynamism in the industry? As one participant said, “[Sustainability] is going to be hard and not all the schools are going to survive” (#ML01-0010, 32:33). In regard to SPLA leadership, another participant indicated that leaders improve longevity and impact at their institutions “if they’re willing to adapt to change”; however, there are physical, emotional, and mental fatigue factors that indicate when “it’s time for some fresh eyes and fresh thinking” (#SL01-0009, 50:45).

Also interesting was the idea that leaders are held accountable for the situations that occur on their campuses whether they were involved or not. For example, situations involving politics, diversity, or race relations may not have been influenced by leaders; however, as one participant noted, “Everything trickles upward, and when it rises to a level of embarrassing the institution (somehow affecting its status), there’s usually one head that rolls and that’s the top one” (#SL01-0009, 58:48). This reality indicates that SPLA leaders will be accountable for change even if they prefer to resist adapting.

The Conceptual Framework. The conceptual framework for the study indicates that the research focuses on HEI leadership and is founded on concepts related to the ability of leaders to adapt in the higher education industry. These concepts interact in a variety of manners, depicting the extreme levels of complication and entanglement characterizing SPLA leadership. One concept applied is the characterization of SPLA colleges and universities as complex adaptive systems composed of interdependent elements operating and interacting independently on

various levels throughout the organization while being required to simultaneously interact cohesively to accomplish overall institutional goals (Rosenhead et al., 2019). Complexity Leadership Theory also contributes to the framework of the study as a concept useful for better understanding the impact of adaptive leadership styles and strategies on HEI competitive advantage and sustainability, and for establishing best practices in complex systems. A third concept of the research framework is the existence of dynamic environmental conditions and their impact on both SPLA leaders and SPLA institutions. Final concepts enhancing the framework relate to the performance and methods of leaders operating in complexity and dynamism and the influence their styles and actions have on institutional competitive advantage and overall sustainability.

Complexity Leadership Theory (CLT). Leaders adopting CLT methods, according to Makinen (2018), maximize the potential of their organizations when they find the appropriate balance between chaos and control. The findings indicate the need for leaders at SPLA colleges and universities to engage in and apply complexity leadership theory to adapt to “changing roles in higher education” as expectations and responsibilities become increasingly diverse in response to dynamism (#SL01-0015, 22:59). Ambidexterity theory is applicable as leaders, especially in mid-level leadership, are called upon to fill dual positions that combine administrative and faculty responsibilities. The dual roles are being created in part due to shrinking departments and the need to increase efficiencies, doing more with fewer resources. (#ML01-0012, 33:09) The commodification of education “creates a lot of dissonance between faculty and administration,” according to one participant, causing leadership among traditional silos to be “very challenging and complex” (#ML01-0016, 09:41).

Small Private Liberal Arts Colleges and Universities as Complex Adaptive Systems.

Findings confirm that SPLA colleges and universities are complex adaptive systems with multiple and diverse academic and administrative departments historically operating as silos within each individual institution. Kershner and McQuillan (2016) claim that CASs are unpredictable and dynamic by nature and require adaptable leaders who are adept at handling complexity and chaos. Interview responses affirm this characterization and assert that situations were exacerbated during the coronavirus pandemic. COVID created an environment of increased isolation, resulting in less personal and informal interactions between leaders. SPLA institutions experience multiple individual departmental missions and goals; developing and maintaining alignment with the HEI's overall mission, vision, and values becomes "the tricky part" (#ML01-0012, 30:44). Also, for mid-level leaders, complexity is compounded as they "strive to build bridges" between students, faculty, and staff, and senior-level administrators when groups become intentionally more diverse (#ML01-0010, 17:19).

One participant described HEI's as a three-ring circus where, as a ringmaster, you may find yourself providing leadership within various rings or even between the rings at any given time. And despite the complexity, it's important to focus on the fact that all are part of one circus. "It takes an extraordinary individual to be able to balance the three rings," claims the interviewee (#ML01-0010, 26:49).

In addition to internal complexities, the HEIs are also subject to a variety of external influences that contribute to their characterization as CASs, including the influence of accrediting bodies and federal and state governments. As noted by one participant, "we dance to a lot of masters in higher education" (#SL01-0009, 11:22).

Dynamic Environmental Conditions. Research findings indicate that environmental conditions in HEI are challenging and constantly changing. Such conditions, according to Khan (2017), serve to counter-productively inhibit the transformation of traditional and outdated leadership styles and methods. Haberberger (2018) further claims that core values and objectives of SPLA institutions are jeopardized when leaders attempt to meet the demands of dynamism. One interviewee stated, “I’ve been in higher education continuously now for about 34 years and, of all that time, this is the period of time where it has been most buffeted by pressures” (#SL01-0015, 10:22). A variety of conditions were cited by respondents including societal conditions, cultural shifts, political climate, and a global pandemic that escalated and accelerated the need to adapt.

The most commonly cited environmental challenge that is forecasted to impact SPLA institutions in coming years is the impending “birth dearth.” Senior and mid-level leaders alike noted that this condition that has been attributed to a period of time during the recession of 2008 in which fewer children were born. The birth dearth is requiring leaders to adapt to a shrinking population of available college-age students for enrollment, increasing competition and demanding an evaluation of physical spaces and programs. Those interviewed concur that a demographic shift and a declining population is creating increased competition for fewer students. As one participant described this phenomenon, “the demographic cliff” for HEIs will be in 2026.

The commodification of the industry that is transforming education into a transactional good is another condition some leaders consider a “tragic trajectory from education to a big business model” (#ML01-0016, 02:54). This shift is driven by the influence of consumerism resulting from changing student and parent expectations and is creating pressures to produce

employability outcomes and demands for cost containment. Unfortunately, some leaders also feel that these shifts are de-personalizing higher education.

Some lesser notable challenges in current industry environments included low unemployment rates and military opportunities in the Midwest that are enticing young adults to choose other options—entering the workforce or signing up to serve the country rather than pursue a higher education degree. Also, while it is not uncommon for young people to take a break between high school and college, one participant felt it was likely that “some students took a gap year because of COVID because colleges couldn’t offer the same experience” as before the pandemic (#ML01-0013, 06:31).

Technology was mentioned infrequently; however, one respondent noted, “The world is getting smaller” (#ML01-0013, 1:00:38), and others indicated that skills and tools learned and implemented during COVID-19 would be valuable for future use. Generally, despite technological advances that may create increased opportunities for distance learning, most interviewed expressed a preference for students in seats, physically experiencing and participating face-to-face in their higher education.

Although not the focus of this study as an isolated condition, the COVID-19 pandemic is an environmental condition impacting and influencing every leader at every institution involved in the research study. The pandemic became the elephant in the room that needed to be addressed in order to move on to the multiple other pre-existing conditions. Most agreed that COVID escalated and accelerated the need to address items that were already becoming an issue, such as opportunities for distance learning and online quality of learning. One mid-level leader identified a unique perspective about adapting to meet the needs of future students, suggesting the longevity of the impact of COVID from the consumer perspective: “We have a whole generation

of students who will be coming who had deeply dislocating experiences” beginning in middle school. . . . “They’re going to be different” (#ML02-0003, 02:52).

HEI Leadership Adaptability. According to Gigliotti (2020), adaptability is a critical competency for leaders managing dynamism in the higher education industry. As stated by one research participant regarding leadership in the contemporary HEI environment, “Adaptability is absolutely necessary. Change is the only thing that is unchanging. But there’s also a need for the continuity” (#ML01-0014, 18:35). As stated by another participant who claims the HEI has been profoundly altered since the recession of 2008, “Pivot is the word of the day” (#SL01-0009, 11:22). Leaders at HEIs, particularly SPLAs, have been adapting styles and strategies ever since, employing practices such as tuition discounting and employing third-party providers to improve competitive advantage and sustainability.

Adaptive leadership, as defined by Kershner and McQuillan (2016) and Northouse (2016), is a complex leadership style that challenges status quo methods and practices to incite adaptive change within an organization while simultaneously assisting members to adapt and thrive in new scenarios. Fumasoli et al. (2020) asserts that those associated with the HEI consider a leader’s ability to adapt a crucial element for surviving conditions. Findings of the research confirm the existence and need for leaders who not only adapt their own personal strategies, but also encourage and support the adaptability of others throughout their SPLA colleges and universities. Regarding leadership adaptability, findings indicate that leaders need to be “more welcoming of risk” and “open to innovation” (#SL01-0015, 13:49). In response to challenges of diversity, race and LGBTQ issues, participants indicated that leaders “need to be able to adapt” or experience stagnation and decline (#ML01-0012, 21:17). “Everything is situational in our business right now—everything,” claims one participant but that scenario seems

to provide opportunity for leaders who are able to adapt and willing to pivot quickly when the information supports change (#SL01-0009, 39:06).

HEI Leadership Performance, Actions, and Behaviors. Cheslock and Riggs (2020) assert that leadership performance provides strategies critical for the survival of SPLAs as competition between HEIs intensifies. Desired leadership actions and behaviors cited by participants included listening, respect, and decisiveness while realizing that not everyone will agree with or be pleased with decisions that have to made. HEIs as complex systems and uncertainty in the environment require hard decisions and leaders must be okay “with not always being everybody’s friend” (#ML02-0003, 23:46). Personal interactions and connection were noted as being critical “for setting a vision, getting updates, and determining action steps” (#ML02-0003, 22:13). Practicing decision-making that acknowledges limited resources and constraints and at the same time operating with respect and trust for colleagues were noted as desirable while radical change was considered undesirable (#SL01-0015, 12:56). One participant claimed that leaders at SPLA institutions need to adapt their actions so that “everyone sees we’re all contributing,” which may mean being more available, intentionally connecting, and being authentic (#SL01-0009, 48:26).

HEI Leadership Methods, Styles, and Strategies. Leaders recognized the need for planning strategies to be adapted. Traditional strategic planning, which typically includes a multi-year process to develop a fixed five-year implementation agenda, will be inappropriate because “there’s no way we can know what’s going to hit us” that far into the future (#SL02-0007, 09:01). Leaders concur that planning strategies will need to be broader and more flexible, and leadership styles will have to be adaptable in response to the rapid change and uncertainty in

the market (#SL02-0007). Leaders and organizations unwilling to innovate methods and strategies “are the ones that eventually die” (#SL02-0007, 11:55).

One interviewee noted that leaders at SPLA HEIs “tend to be very pragmatic,” making a concerted effort to focus on accomplishing what they are able to achieve with limited capacity and means (#SL01-0015, 12:15). Among the leaders at the SPLA institutions interviewed, there is a consensus that adopting service-focused methods have positive results on institutions’ advantage and sustainability.

Collaboration was commonly mentioned as a key strategy for SPLA leaders. The idea of collaboration was conveyed through various terms including communication, transparency, feedback, and team approach. One mid-level leader who has risen in title and responsibility over a period of two decades indicated the value and importance of seeking “wise counsel” from trusted individuals both inside and outside the organization to connect with and solicit input (#ML02-0007, 26:46). Another mentioned having “to raise my eyes” to recognize the existence and needs of other leaders and departments within the institution (#ML02-0002, 54:15).

Various leadership styles that were mentioned include Zeitgeist Leadership, Servant Leadership, Situational Leadership, Participative Leadership, and Collaborative Leadership. Informal observations revealed that senior level gatekeepers at HEIs are protective of their SPLA members, expressing concerns regarding workloads and stress resulting from the pandemic.

Competitive Advantage and Institutional Sustainability. Hilbun and Mamiseinvili (2016) assert that competitive advantage and sustainability of HEIs are more significantly impacted by the leaders’ ability to adapt than they are by the dynamic industry conditions in which they operate. SPLA institutions well-positioned to achieve competitive advantage and sustainability in dynamic industry conditions will be those with great brand recognition, good

financials, and a great constituency (#SL02-0007, 08:15). Leaders who have the ability to build on and leverage those qualities will be the ones who contribute to positive outcomes and the well-being of the colleges and universities they serve (#SL02-0007).

The results of the interviews indicate that accomplishing competitive advantage and sustainability will require leaders to adapt to “strategic planning and evidence-based decision making” (#SL01-0015, 18:36). In what is classified as a “highly competitive market,” leaders are going to need to take calculated risks guided by data and evidence (#SL01-0009, 43:45). In order to achieve competitive advantage and sustainability, leaders will have to adapt to becoming less risk averse.

Anticipated Themes.

Balanced Approach. One anticipated theme discovered from the literature asserts that HEI leaders must adopt balanced approaches and styles that incorporate multiple professional and personal strategies for leading their colleges and universities in rapidly changing environments (Gaus et al., 2020; Gigliotti & Ruben, 2017; Hassan et al., 2018). A real challenge associated with the multiple demands of leading complex organizations is “finding that balance” (#ML01-0016, 35:14). Status quo leadership methods at SPLA colleges and universities are not relevant for navigating the current environmental landscape. This theme was affirmed regarding traditional HEI practices of shared governance that inhibits an institution’s ability to be flexible and quickly adapt to change. As noted by one interviewee, “some of the patience that’s required for shared governance is being tested at many institutions” (#SL01-0015, 15:34).

Enabling Leadership. Another anticipated theme was that leaders at SPLA institutions would have to encourage and enable organization members to embrace change and engage in the tensions created by the multiple goals of the complex systems (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018; Schulze

& Pinkow, 2020). Operating in silos, as has been historically the case at HEIs, is no longer conducive to sustainability and is “more dangerous now than ever” because no one department or leader should assume they have all of the necessary information to make a decision (#SL01-0011, 16:55).

Adaptive Space. The need for intentionally creating opportunities for organizational members to interact and confront opposing objectives in order to facilitate innovation in rapidly changing scenarios was another anticipated theme (Kodama, 2019).

Organizational Adaptability. The importance of building adaptable HEIs by adopting transformational practices and incorporating individuals into the organizations who are adaptable was an anticipated theme (Wang et al., 2017). Finding and preparing new leaders who are able to step up and face unpredictable and challenging conditions as other leaders retire or step down is a critical concern for SPLA senior leaders. In some instances, mid-level leaders were expected to assert themselves to pursue opportunities for leadership growth. At other sites, senior leaders are in conversation about the potential of members intentionally targeting individuals and preparing them for specific future leadership needs in the institutions. One senior leader confirmed the practice, stating, “We’re trying to develop leaders, and we’re investing in some people in new ways” (#SL02-0007, 21:35).

Leadership Development. The cruciality of continually developing leaders within SPLA colleges and universities in order to better equip them for navigating industry dynamism and organizational complexity was an anticipated theme developed from a review of academic literature (Gigliotti & Ruben, 2017; Hassan et al., 2018; Sayler et al., 2019). The findings support the anticipated importance of leadership development for navigating dynamic conditions and accomplishing competitive advantage and sustainability at SPLA colleges and universities.

This particular theme was becoming increasingly important to the continued existence of SPLA HEIs prior to COVID-19; however, it became absolutely crucial in midst of the pandemic.

Leaders need to learn and adapt skills and tools to remain relevant and employ new technologies for serving their consumers. Approaches to leadership development differed between sites with some intentionally encouraging formal professional growth through structured learning opportunities while others allowed the growth to occur informally through methods such as peer mentoring. The less formal development style may be a result of limited resources; however, one participant noted unanticipated positive hands-on learning created by this condition: “There’s plenty of opportunities because we’re chronically understaffed—there’s really no shortage of opportunities for somebody to take on new responsibilities” (#SL01-0015, 27:13).

As anticipated, the COVID-19 global pandemic is a theme that greatly impacted and continues to impact HEI leaders, both accelerating pre-existing challenges for SPLA institutions and creating new adversities. As a result of the additional responsibilities and unanticipated demands, some leaders felt overwhelmed. One participant admitted, “My personal leadership and leadership qualities probably suffered, to be honest” (#ML01-0012, 16:46). Preservation and survival during the pandemic required leaders to adapt and pivot quickly, shifting the focus away from common practices of formal and informal personal interactions with peer leaders. One participant asserts that both leaders and followers are in desperate need of refreshment (#ML01-0010, 29:32) An unanticipated outcome of COVID is the positive and lasting impact of changes made to adapt to new methods: “we are now equipped to teach in ways that we weren’t before” (#SL01-0015, 23:42).

The Literature. Research findings confirm the existence of dynamic industry conditions as depicted in the academic literature. The “birth dearth,” as identified by Hilbun and

Mamiseinvili (2016), was consistently mentioned as a threat to institutional sustainability by interviewees. Although there was isolated confusion among mid-level leaders about the cause, the majority concur with the literature that the Great Recession of 2007-08 created a scenario where fewer babies were born, resulting in a decline in the traditional student-age individual, a decline expected to culminate in 2026 and continue influencing enrollments beyond that year. Although academic literature predicts SPLA institutions to be most impacted, findings indicate that senior leaders at the enrolled institutions remain confident in their ability to attract new students and tap new markets (Grawe, 2018; #SL01-0009; #SL02-0007).

Multiple other complex and rapidly changing conditions claimed by academic authors such as Gigliotti and Ruben (2017) and Doyle and Malcolm (2018) were confirmed. These included the influence of neo-liberalism and the commodification of education (Tomlinson, 2016; #SL01-0015), funding and cost (Kleinman et al., 2018; #SL01-0011), and globalization and technology (Fumasoli et al., 2020, #01-0010). The classification of HEIs as complex adaptive systems and the tendency to adhere to traditional practices is considered a contributing factor to an inability to adapt in dynamic environments (Khan, 2017; Gaus et al., 2020; #ML01-0012). Academic literature claims that historic and conventional leadership methods will not be adequate for navigating dynamic conditions; leaders must adapt (Bendermacher et al., 2016; Dumas & Beinecke, 2018). Responses to interview question four show senior and mid-level leaders concur and are adapting their styles and performances in order to innovate and adjust to changes.

Research findings confirm that industry conditions in higher education do exist as described in much of the academic literature; however, despite pessimistic forecasts, leaders at some SPLA institutions in Midwest United States are experiencing steady and increasing

enrollment. Among the institutions enrolled in the research, retention rates have also been improving amidst the challenges. One leader who participated suggests that unexpected rises may be a result of “presenting the opportunity for a really authentic community experience” (#ML01-0016, 04:34). The respondent also attributes the positive numbers to “focusing on our graduation outcomes” (#ML01-0016, 04:34). Another participant asserts the benefits of innovative leadership but claims, “God has our back—you can’t discount the God-factor—we wouldn’t be here without the grace of God” (#ML01-0010, 09:50).

Summary of the Findings

College and university leaders are tasked with guiding their institutions in dynamic conditions. Jarrett and Newton (2021) claim, “Real success in HE leadership entails genuine passion to perform and willingness to do the hard work. . . . There is no single ‘right’ approach to designing or even to understanding leadership in HE. There are too many variables . . .” (p. 246-247). The editors’ assertions affirm the need for rich qualitative research projects that garner real-lived experiences and perspectives of HE leaders to expand on and develop knowledge and theory that consider the many factors impacting their leadership.

The results of the research study confirm that the higher education industry is operating in a dynamic environment characterized by population declines, shifting demographics, commodification, societal pressures, government influences, and cultural changes. There seemed to be agreement among senior leaders and mid-level leaders that conditions are challenging, uncertain, and rapidly changing. The consensus among SPLA leaders is that many institutions may be forced to make hard choices in response to complex and uncertain conditions in the HEI (#SL01-0009, 34:06) Reduced pools of applicants, tuition freezes and high discount rates contribute to declining revenues that typically lead to staff and program reductions, further

resulting in reduced ability to attract students and a less passionate donor pool. However, some leaders consider reductions an opportunity to improve efficiencies and establish priorities and processes that align with mission. One participant admitted that although there are days of regretting being in a leadership position during challenging conditions, this person proclaimed, “Ultimately, I wouldn’t change it for the world” (#ML02-0003, 54:05). Another interviewee claims that SPLA leaders are “in a unique position to really remind the world again of what the core values of higher education are” (#SL01-0015, 29:53). For private institutions that are particularly faith-based, crucial components to their core values are serving and contributing to the common good: “A Christian college in the liberal arts tradition needs to address truthful ways of looking at life and what ultimately matters in forming our identity” (#ML01-0010, 06:22).

Although flexibility and adaptability in response to a complex market were considered important, exhibiting restraint in response was also noted as important. Adapting leadership practices and methods in response to dynamism in the industry was considered crucial; however, consistently and unapologetically being committed and faithful to foundational principles without deviation appears to strengthen HEI leaders’ ability to navigate conditions and secure positive outcomes regarding competitive advantage and the sustainability of the institutions they serve.

Leaders at institutions surviving and thriving in contemporary HEI environments recognize and understand the conditions and are seeking out the opportunities for adapting and transforming their colleges and universities. Leaders successfully navigating complexity, rapid change, and uncertainty in the industry are engaging in a continued commitment to institutional core values and principles, good communication with as many members as possible, and consistent methods and behaviors that encourage stability and calm. Research indicates that this

leadership commitment, communication, and consistency contribute to an increased ability to adapt strategic planning, alignment, and people-development practices. Study results suggest that these leadership methods and performances appear to positively impact competitive advantage and sustainability at SPLA colleges and universities.

Application to Professional Practice

The results of this study can improve general business practices at SPLA colleges and universities in the Midwest and provide potential strategies HEI leaders can implement to help their institutions adapt to contemporary environmental conditions. Regarding business practices and strategies for SPLA colleges and universities, the research revealed that adapting status quo methods would be necessary for navigating contemporary conditions. General business practices regarding leading complex systems that can be improved include methods and forms of communication and leadership development. Strategies that hold potential for success include commitment and adherence to core values and missions, as well as an increased focus on alignment of all stakeholders.

Improving General Business Practice

General business practices for communication at SPLA institutions, which are characterized by complexity due to the many various departments, can be improved as a result of this study. Leaders at HEIs that were experiencing success in competitive advantage and sustainability described forms of communication that were inclusive of all members of the organization, were most often physical gatherings, and occurred with frequent consistency. Both senior leaders and mid-level leaders instigated and participated in regular written communications and group interactions to improve transparency, increase the consistency of the messaging, and provide opportunities for feedback in non-threatening environments. Although

senior leaders at one enrolled institution indicated that they meet as needed, senior leaders at an institution that was experiencing better advantage and sustainability results were far more intentional about communicating with members to discuss challenges, opportunities, and changes being considered at all levels throughout the organization.

Results of the study indicate that leaders at high-performing institutions were intentional about internal leadership development practices of their members. Within this research, it was noted that institutions with positive enrollment and fund-raising results had senior leaders who specifically targeted mid-level leaders with potential for development. The development was achieved through a variety of methods including mentoring by senior members, monitoring performance and providing constructive feedback, offering in-house seminars and conferences with on-site experts, encouraging and paying for participation in off-site conferences, making funding available for research that contributes to institutional health, and giving opportunities for emotional and mental health counseling as desired and needed. Senior leaders at high-performing SPLA institutions further encouraged the development of mid-level leaders and others within their organizations by providing opportunities for engaging with local area business leaders. Members of the organizations were then developed as they interacted as representatives of their particular HEI on community boards and in collaboration with city leaders on various projects to serve the communities in which the SPLA institutions were located.

Research results indicate that leaders are adapting practices for generating revenue. Small colleges and universities previously able to rely on tuition income are being required to innovate and adopt new tactics to cover operational expenses. Tuition discounting was an initial solution for combatting the high cost of education acting as a deterrent to prospective students. This practice, which is commonly used at SPLA institutions to challenge high-cost perceptions, is not

new and enables institutions to improve competitive advantage by offering pricing to parents and students that is more comparable to rival institutions. However, regarding best practices, HEI leaders recognize that discounting should be applied with caution as excessive use leads to an inability to generate sufficient tuition dollars for sustainability and does not provide long-term solutions. Creating financial stability is being accomplished through innovative fund-raising performed by senior leaders in many cases. Senior leaders are becoming involved in their local communities to increase exposure for the institution and garner local financial support. Senior leaders are also pursuing donors for gifts to increase endowments and fund specific projects.

Leadership practices surrounding traditional shared governance models remain prevalent among SPLA leaders interviewed for the research. Leaders involved in the research, however, noted that dynamic conditions, most especially the urgency and uncertainty created by COVID, often create challenges for the extensive people involvement and time required to fully engage in ideal forms of shared governance. Many of those interviewed acknowledged that contemporary conditions require decisions to be made with less information, in shorter time periods, and with fewer people. Despite the demands, SPLA leaders still prefer to provide opportunities for organization members at all levels to participate. In general, the leaders at the institutions enrolled in the study emphasized important practices such as consulting with as many people as are impacted by a decision and listening, not just hearing, what their followers have to contribute.

Potential Application Strategies

Leaders who participated in the study confirmed the need for being flexible and adapting habitual and long-established strategies. Although the leaders interviewed agreed that change was necessary for operating in contemporary industry conditions, the findings of this study

reveal a need for adaptable leadership strategies that respond and adjust to conditions but that also remain true and consistent with foundational principles and values of the institution.

Leadership with a strong commitment to core values and strict adherence to mission and vision were consistent with positive institutional outcomes. While these SPLA leaders were adapting methods and practices, they were remaining faithful to the distinct principles that were the basis of the institution identity. A successful strategy of leaders at the sites enrolled was to provide stability and calm to all members of their organizations, despite the complexity and uncertainty of the industry, by not adapting critical core components. Mid-level leaders, who typically provide a bridge between faculty and administration at SPLA institutions, seemed especially adamant about the need for this consistency and stability.

Transforming hiring strategies provides a potential application for SPLA institutions interested in improving leadership adaptability and institutional outcomes. Involving senior and mid-level leaders in recruiting, screening, and hiring employees increases opportunities for improved alignment. The alignment of leaders at both senior and mid-level positions is crucial for maintaining organizational stability in dynamism. The core stability provides roots for the organization that are deep enough to enhance the flexibility and the adaptability of the various limbs of their complex adaptive systems. Leaders also benefit from adopting firing strategies for sifting out and letting go of individuals not aligned. Institutions reap additional benefits when leaders implement rigorous hiring processes and capitalize on initial aggressive vetting processes by developing the persons who are already determined to be a good fit. These well-fitting employees, who are already determined to be like-minded and loyal to overall goals, are targeted and groomed through intentional development for mobility into larger leader positions. The

strategy of hiring for fit and developing those who are well-aligned into mid-level and senior level leaders ensures consistent levels of commitment to foundational principles.

Another strategy noted by several senior leaders was adapting typical and historic methods for creating five-year strategic plans. Interviewees explained that strategic plans have historically been developed over approximately three years and implemented for five at SPLA colleges and universities. Leaders at the sites enrolled touted the need and benefit of accelerating the drafting process and developing shorter, more flexible strategic plans. Adapting this strategy is in response to complexity and uncertainty in the HEI industry, causing leaders to plan for multiple possible situations. At one institution, leaders regularly asked “what if” questions, and at another SPLA the leaders engaged in scenario planning rather than strategic planning. Additionally, the strategic plans have become more akin to suggestions for the future based on the most available, data-informed educated guesses available. More than ever, SPLA colleges and universities are turning to third-party consultants to provide detailed data that informs and influences the projections and decisions leaders must make.

Adapted teaching strategies offer a potential application for SPLA colleges and universities. Mid-level leaders, who generally operated in a space between administration and faculty, become especially instrumental in this process. While senior leaders desire and encourage teaching methods that will appeal to broader populations of prospective students, it is generally the task of mid-level leaders to create “buy-in” from faculty. These teaching strategies include enhanced techniques, technologies, and methods designed to attract distance learners, non-traditional learners, first generation learners, and advanced education learners.

Amid bleak predictions touted by academic and industry professionals, the majority of leaders involved in the study were optimistic about the future of their institutions. Rather than

denying conditions, they were committed to confronting and defying dynamic markets. Leaders interviewed at SPLA colleges and universities in the Midwest fully acknowledged the conditions said to threaten their existence; however, they did not appear to be conceding or losing heart. Rather, they are adapting to the dynamism and adopting strategies that reflect hopefulness for the future. In addition to doubling-down on their core values and innovating how they develop potential, they are thinking creatively about entering new markets and adding new programs. The most promising strategy witnessed from SPLA leaders was their determined movement forward based on a belief that they provide a good product and society needs what they have to offer.

Summary of Application to Professional Practice

Results from the study indicate that implementing and maintaining good communication, engaging in targeted leader development, innovating revenue sources, and modifying traditional governance models are general business practices that can enable leaders to adapt. Leadership strategies that can potentially be applied to improve leaders' ability to adapt to rapid change and uncertainty ironically include inflexibility when pressured to modify core principles. A key leadership strategy contributing to institutional success as identified by the research is knowing and remaining entrenched in your identity—allowing that to anchor every choice and change. Other strategies with potential for application include shorter and more flexible strategic plans, transformed teaching techniques, and a sense of optimism and hopefulness.

Recommendations for Further Study

Limitations within this study will provide potential propellant for advancing the understanding of adaptable leadership strategies and theories. Future researchers are encouraged to apply the impact of COVID-19 along with various other dynamic environmental conditions as they present themselves to analyze implications for employing CLT to manage change and

uncertainty. Influence of CLT on leadership for competitive advantage and sustainability should be considered in the context of emerging conditions.

Complexity and rapid change have been conditions impacting the higher education industry for several years; however, the specific influence of the COVID-19 pandemic remains uncertain. Every interview participant noted the pandemic at some point in their responses. Some considered COVID a catalyst that intensified pre-existing conditions that were already coming to a head. Interestingly, senior level leaders were apt to recognize the opportunities provided by COVID while mid-level leaders were more overwhelmed by conditions related to the pandemic. The impact of Covid-19 on leaders and their performances provides opportunities for further study.

Another possible opportunity for further research is the assumptions and predictions that small institutions in the Midwest are at higher risk of closure due to dynamic conditions. The results of the study indicate that SPLA colleges and universities in this geographic region may be better equipped than expected to adapt and navigate the rapid change and complexity in the higher education industry. Interviews and contextual data gathered indicate that these institutions have always had to recruit aggressively to attract students to more rural locations, and fundraising has always been critical for survival. Also, according to leader responses, their small size and private status enable them to be nimble, speed up processes, and adapt more quickly and easily. One participant further asserted the increased competitive advantage of observing impact and responses of HEIs on the coasts to determine best practices for navigating change and complexity as it transitioned to the Midwest. Therefore, further study, could consider the advantages of being small, private, and more rural in the contemporary environmental climate.

Reflections

Conducting the research study supplied the researcher with multiple opportunities to grow personally and professionally. Interactions with participants spawned increased understanding, appreciation, and insights while conducting the study improved a variety of skills. The research also provided opportunity to more fully comprehend the relevance and applicability of biblical perspectives and Christian worldview on leadership functions related to adaptability, methods, and performance.

Personal & Professional Growth

Interactions with participants provided the researcher with personal growth while conducting the study. The researcher was inspired and motivated by individuals interviewed to hold fast to personal core values and ideals despite changing conditions. The researcher became more aware of the need for and benefits of respecting the gifts of all members of society and being committed to continuous development for self and others in order to reach God-given potential. Another area of personal growth enhanced by conducting the research was the value of humility and the difference between confidence and conceit. Confidence that is good is characterized by faith in God and the people you are blessed to partner with and the belief that you are firmly aligned with your mission and vision.

Conducting the research provided opportunities for me to grow professionally through the development of skills that will be valuable in future career endeavors. The ability to perform research was enhanced initially while working to find and solicit potential sites for enrollment and candidates for interviews. Other professional skills developed included written and oral communication capabilities enhanced through mail and email correspondence, telephone conversations, and personal interviews with research participants. Another professional skill

developed was active listening. More than just hearing, active listening requires intentionality, restraint, and a willingness to not be heard. Critical thinking and analysis skills were also developed as the researcher absorbed a significant number of individual perspectives and experiences to assess and identify themes. These skills were further enhanced by the desire to find meaning, increase understanding, and make a contribution to the industry.

Biblical Perspective

Several business functions have been explored in the study including leadership adaptability, leadership methods, leadership practices, and managing complexity/complex systems in dynamic industry environments. Scripture is relevant to these contemporary functions, lending insight and guidance for applying a Christian worldview.

Regarding adaptability and change, Ecclesiastes 3:1 states, “For everything there is a season, a time for every activity under the sun” (English Standard Version). This scripture encourages being fluid in every season and recognizing that different seasons and situations require different responses and priorities. With respect to consistent practices and committed leadership methods, the writer of II Corinthians 5:9 claimed, “So, whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please Him,” showing that regardless of the environment, the ultimate goals remained unchanged (English Standard Version). Jesus pointed out the importance of commitment to core as well in Luke 10:41-42 when he admonished Martha for being consumed by all the pressures surrounding her: “You are worried and upset over all these details! There is only one thing worth being concerned about” (New Living Translation). Jesus emphasized the importance of focusing on the important rather than the immediate.

The styles and practices of leaders serving at institutions with positive enrollment numbers appear to align themselves with Scripture, which states, “Do not conform any longer to

the patterns of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Romans 12:2, New International Version). Leaders at SPLA institutions in the Midwest that are experiencing the best outcomes are committed to steadfast adherence to the religious principles foundational to their colleges and universities. Both mid-level and senior leaders at these sites were unapologetic about their values and not only encouraged but demanded strict alignment from all members of the organization. The leaders at the most successful organizations employed transparency regarding their values and expectations and were uncompromising in their standards.

Relatedly, the familiar Bible story from Daniel 3 lends valuable business insights for the importance of remaining committed to core principles during times of environmental pressure. As Scripture reveals, three young mid-level leaders experienced environmental pressure to compromise their core values and principles. When they refused to waiver, they were thrown into a fiery furnace where the heat had been increased by seven times its normal temperature. Despite threat and extreme pressure, the three young leaders remained faithful. The Lord joined the men in the midst of the fire. Not only were they delivered out unharmed and released from the cords that bound them, but they were also promoted to greater positions of authority. Likewise, research findings imply that SPLA leaders who remain firmly committed and do not adapt the foundational religious beliefs or standards are not being “burned” by the industry environment. Leaders at SPLA institutions who are feeling the heat of contemporary dynamism in the market but refuse to be pressured to change what truly matters are experiencing successful outcomes for their institutions. Conversely, the responses from some mid-level leaders at institutions with less successful enrollment and retention outcomes indicated that they were attempting to find a more moderate middle ground that allows for divergent theological perspectives. In their attempt to be more accepting in areas such as sexual orientation, the leaders

at these institutions seemed more willing to compromise foundational positions to attract additional students by portraying a more loving and welcoming community. Unfortunately, the leadership practice of adapting core principles seems to indicate a contribution to the decline of the institution. Conversations with newer hires to mid-level leadership positions indicate that in an effort to increase diversity and fill vacancies, institutions may not be properly vetting candidates, resulting in members who are not on board or fully convinced of the foundational principles. As noted in the scripture text from Romans, Christians are to be transformed not conformed. The verse goes on to state that when God's people follow these instructions, they "will be able to test and approve what God's will is" (Romans 12:2, New International Version).

Romans 12 also provides wisdom regarding leading complex adaptive systems such as SPLA colleges and universities. In discussing the logistics of the Church of Christ as a complex system that is "one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same functions," the Bible provides insight for HEI leaders (Romans 12:4, New International Version). Senior and mid-level leaders at the enrolled sites comprehended the complexity of the institutions and were appreciative and respectful of the many different functions and responsibilities. Although senior and mid-level leaders have individual goals for the separate departments, leaders accomplishing the best results embraced the fact that they ultimately had to operate as a cohesive unit to achieve advantage and sustainability. Accomplishing overall objectives of SPLA institutions demands leaders recognize that members at all levels of their colleges and universities have "different gifts" that must be encouraged and developed (Romans 12:6, New International Version). A best practice for senior leaders regarding the gifts of their members is to consult with mid-level leaders and personally interact with individuals in order to acknowledge God-given abilities, target potential, and develop talent from within. Senior leaders

who are able to maintain stability and structure while simultaneously relinquishing control of the details to highly equipped mid-level leaders seem to garner best results for their SPLAs.

What was observed and heard from personal interviews indicates that leaders achieving competitive advantage for their complex systems are following the biblical instruction to “cling to what is good” by remaining faithful to their core mission and vision and to “be devoted to one another” by encouraging and intentionally developing members to reach their full potential. The leaders at institutions experiencing lesser results are considering compromise as a solution to attract a broader base of students and are less intentional and more organic about the development of future leaders within their own organization.

Summary of Reflections

Senior and mid-level leaders at the SPLA institutions involved in the study were not able to specifically pinpoint the catalyst for their continued success despite dire forecasts. A couple guessed that they were anomalies while a few speculated that it was the experience their institution provided. Ideally, the research would identify exactly why these leaders are winning for their SPLA colleges and universities. When it comes to being adaptable, they are and they will. That’s the thing about small private colleges and universities in the Midwest—sustainability has never been easy and they have never been able to make assumptions. These leaders remain optimistic and do not operate with “a spirit of fearfulness, but of power and love and discipline” (II Timothy 1:7, American Standard Version). The HEIs they serve have been operating in dynamic conditions for many decades and have operated in faith and a belief in their calling and purpose. They may be adapting strategies and methods and practices, but they are not adapting their identities. They remain committed to core values and religious principles even under political and societal pressure.

Summary of Section 3

Section 3 of the dissertation provides an overview of the study and details regarding the discoveries of the results of the research. The study revealed support for anticipated themes and also exposed new ideas that were considered and interpreted. Visual representation of the information has been provided, and the relationship between the results and the intensions of the study have been identified. Additionally, the researcher has determined possible opportunities for improving business strategies and established applications of the findings to the professional practice of leadership adaptability at SPLA colleges and universities. Section 3 of the study concludes with suggestions for further exploration related to the topic along with a narrative of the researcher's personal post-research reflections.

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Appendix A: Interview Guide (Creswell & Poth, 2018)

Time of interview:

Date:

Place:

Interviewer:

Interviewee:

Position of interviewee:

(Briefly describe the project) Academic and practitioner articles indicate that the higher education industry is experiencing complex and rapidly changing external and internal environmental conditions. This research project is a study regarding leadership styles and strategies in contemporary dynamic environments of the higher education industry.

Questions:

1. How would you describe the environmental landscape or current conditions of the higher education industry and how has your institutions been impacted?
2. How do the leaders in general manage change at your institution?
3. How have current conditions influenced your personal leadership role at the institution and the leadership practices you employ?
4. What do you consider critical leadership qualities and strategies for successfully navigating contemporary conditions in the higher education industry?
5. How are leaders and leader groups collaborating and how is leadership being developed at various levels within your organization?

6. Given the conditions and your personal experience, how would you describe your vision for the future of your institution?
7. Who should I talk with to find out more about leadership response to dynamic change in institutional environment?

Thank the individual for participating in this interview. Assure him/her of confidentiality of responses and potential future interviews.