

DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP IN WEST VIRGINIA HIGHER EDUCATION

by

Jennie Lee Khun

Doctoral Research Project – Case Study

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Strategic Leadership

Liberty University, School of Business

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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore how public higher education institutions in West Virginia can leverage distributed leadership to influence culture and improve student outcomes. The general problem to be addressed was the lack of distributed leadership in academic organizations creating disparate hierarchical groups resulting in the inability of academic institutions to successfully implement changes that improve student outcomes. The outcome of the research was to contribute to the body of knowledge and reduce the gaps in literature by expanding on the understanding how leaders fail to apply distributed leadership, behaviors that support or fail to support distributed leadership, how student initiatives differ from other change initiatives, and what elements position institutions for success in implementing changes to improve student outcomes. The study included twenty, in-person, one-on-one interviews resulting in six discovered themes. The themes combined with existing literature to identify implementation strategies promoting professional development, empowered decision-making lower in the organizational hierarchy, and feedback systems. The conclusion of this study suggests any industry can benefit from improving general leadership practice through the intentional development of future leaders. Organizations benefit from empowering employees, delegating decision making, and improving desired skills to contribute to the long-term sustainability of the organization.

Keywords: distributed, shared, leadership, empowerment, culture

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Dedication

Thank you, Dr. Ahmed, for your steadfast support in helping guide me through this lengthy process, you have read this Doctoral Research Project – Case Study as many times as I have. This moment would not have been possible without your dedication to my success, the definition of leadership. The feedback you provided throughout this process has exemplified the education profession. I am truly grateful to have had the opportunity to work with you. I would also like to express my gratitude to Dr. Lowes for taking the time to be a part of administrative approval process and providing supportive feedback.

Thank you to my family, friends, and colleagues who have listened to me banter about my progress along this journey, many of you did not have a choice but to listen. I am especially grateful for my parents, Jane, and Stephen, and to my daughter Kailey as they picked up my workload, dealt with my absence, and practiced patience with me. They never faltered as I committed time away from them to pursue this degree, provided words of encouragement, and served as sounding boards. They learned as much about distributed leadership as I have. Finally, I would like to recognize my mentor Joey for sparking my passion for leadership, mentoring me with continuous encouragement, challenging my perspectives, tolerance of my unceasing barrage of questions, and providing support along the way. I appreciate all of you more than words could ever express. Thank you for teaching, inspiring, and pushing me to attain excellence.

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Section 1: The Foundation of the Study

This study was developed as an examination of distributed leadership in higher education. The purpose of this study was to determine how higher education institutions in West Virginia can leverage distributed leadership to influence culture to improve student outcomes. This qualitative case study aimed to explore the factors affecting higher education's ability to attract and retain students. The inclusion of section one began by exploring the specific problem to be addressed as the possible lack of distributed leadership in academic organizations. This lack of leadership can create disparate hierarchical groups within higher education institutions in West Virginia, resulting in the potential inability of academic institutions to successfully implement changes that improve student outcomes. This section offered a description of the background for the study, problem statement, purpose, research questions, research paradigms, design, and methodology. This section also discussed triangulation, the research framework, conceptual framework, terms, assumptions, limitations, delimitations, reduction of gaps in the literature, implications for biblical integration, and the benefit to leadership practices. The presentation of the findings identified key themes discovered during the study and included relevant material quotes directly from participants. The themes were then grouped to discuss how each one applied to the research questions and elements of the research framework. A comparison of the anticipated themes to the discovered themes identified the variations in the anticipated and realized results. Furthermore, supporting material identified potential implementation strategies, ways to improve general leadership practices and provided recommendations for further study by exploring cross-sections of the problem in more granular detail. Lastly, the researcher added comments on personal and professional growth to document

changes throughout the process. Biblical perspectives and a summarized conclusion were added as the ending of the study.

Background of the Problem

Distributed leadership shares responsibility, accountability, and authority across the team by empowering those with the knowledge, skills, and expertise to participate in key decision-making that influences the overall strategy and goals of the organization. Distributed leadership encourages a culture that values team members, grows the future generation of leaders, and potentially improves sustainability for the organization. The general problem to be addressed is the lack of distributed leadership in academic organizations creating disparate hierarchical groups resulting in the inability of academic institutions to successfully implement changes that improve student outcomes. Youngs (2017) stated education reform has not been successful because institutions focus on individual leadership perspectives. Institutions without distributed leadership are missing a critical connection essential to positively impacting student outcomes. In a recent study, Sewerin and Holmberg (2017) demonstrated how an absence of distributed leadership could negatively affect leadership practices related to institutional logic about education, research, formal organization, culture, and boundary-spanning environments. Brower et al. (2020) supported these views by explaining that higher education institutions with democratic data cultures tended to have distributed leadership that encouraged information sharing among staff to utilize data to inform and implement change.

Problem Statement

The general problem addressed was the lack of distributed leadership in academic organizations creating disparate hierarchical groups, resulting in the inability of academic institutions to successfully implement changes that improve student outcomes. Joslyn (2018)

supported these views by explaining that the higher education sector has been subject to calls for a shift from traditional control governance models towards inclusive styles such as distributed leadership. Jones and Harvey (2017) stated higher education operates in a progressively complex environment, placing it under substantial stress and increasing conflict between departments, forewarning the need for a more engaged and broader approach to leadership. In a recent study, Vuori (2019) argued that higher education's hesitance to examine distributed leadership lies in several inherent challenges. The following challenges make the application of distributed leadership very complex: different missions, diverse leadership roles, communication challenges, academic values, and identity issues. The specific problem addressed is the possible lack of distributed leadership in academic organizations creating disparate hierarchical groups within higher education institutions in West Virginia, resulting in the potential inability of academic institutions to successfully implement changes that improve student outcomes.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this flexible qualitative single case study was to expand the understanding behind West Virginia's higher education institutions' inability to successfully implement changes and its effect on student outcomes. The research sought to determine the driving factors related to distributed leadership and see if there is a specific influence on the ability to successfully implement changes in the academic environment. The qualitative nature of the study sought to understand and explain elements of distributed leadership success or failure, student-facing change initiatives, and how the combination of distributed leadership impacts changes that improve student outcomes. The evaluation research for this qualitative study involved a narrative approach to analyze the details of individual experiences and peer-reviewed scholarly research material to identify themes within the context of the participants and case studies. Qualitative

research increases thoughts about experiences and aids in developing a more fully informed narrative of participant identities (Mobley et al., 2019). The researcher explored the larger problem of improving student outcomes through an in-depth study of distributed leadership and its effect on the successful implementation of changes to higher education in West Virginia.

Research Questions

The exploration of distributed leadership in higher education required various research questions to fully provide value. The questions presented aimed to explore leadership failure and then specifically examine attributes and behaviors that support the successful implementation of distributed leadership. The research then utilized those findings to further determine how student initiatives are different and to use those differences to implement changes that positively affect students.

RQ 1: How do leaders fail to apply distributed leadership in higher education?

RQ 1A: What leadership attributes and behaviors contribute to the successful support of distributed leadership?

RQ 1B: What leadership attributes and behaviors contribute to the failure to support distributed leadership?

RQ 2: In what ways are student impacted initiatives different than other change initiatives in higher education?

RQ 2A: How do the differences impact the ability to implement change in higher education institutions?

RQ 3: What elements of distributed leadership are present in higher education that positions institutions for success in implementing changes to improve student outcomes?

Research Questions Related to Problem Statement

The first research question looked at a broad view of why leaders fail to apply distributed leadership. This question required the view of flexibility through an inherited fluid social reality of hierarchical leadership models. The researcher identified the themes and conducted the analysis allowing for flexibility in methodology selection. Themes can easily emerge from reviewing the research data, but the researcher must choose the narrative descriptions that make sense for the proposed questions. The second question explored how student outcome initiatives are different from focused administrative projects. A qualitative case study collects data that best answers the research questions compared with all methods and designs before selecting an option that aligns with the research goal. Question three aimed to focus more specifically on the fundamental pieces of distributed leadership present in organizations that successfully implement change to improve student outcomes. The narrative approach sought to build support for a generalized persona of the organizational culture that adopts changes to support student outcomes.

Nature of the Study

A review of the qualitative methodology examined how the possible lack of distributed leadership in academic organizations creates disparate hierarchical groups within higher education institutions in West Virginia resulting in the potential inability of academic institutions to successfully implement changes that improve student outcomes. The evaluation research for this qualitative study involved a narrative approach to analyze the details of individual experiences and peer reviewed scholarly research material to identify themes within the context of the participants and case studies. Qualitative research increases thoughts about experiences and aids in developing a more fully informed narrative of participant identities (Mobley et al.,

2019). This section sought to further provide detail related to the designs and methodologies for this study.

Discussion of Research Paradigm

A research paradigm characteristically reflects the individual researcher's beliefs about the world they live in and want to live in (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). The research benefits from conducting explorative studies into the various research paradigms to better understand the research paradigm. Furthermore, to better understand how it shapes the approach to the problem the research is attempting to solve. The awareness of knowing oneself is necessary to appropriately select a research paradigm that aligns with the beliefs one holds. Paradigms are sets of beliefs that provide theoretical frameworks for research, relating to both ontology and epistemology to reinforce the selection of research methodologies (Corry et al., 2019). A research paradigm is sometimes difficult to articulate and apply to the research proposal if the researcher does not fully understand each of the four main paradigms. The primary research paradigms include positivism, post-positivism, constructivism, and pragmatism. It is imperative to explore paradigms thoroughly before selecting one. The philosophical orientation of the individual has momentous implications for the impacts of every decision made in the research process, including choice of methodology and methods (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). Each paradigm distinctly influences a researcher's perspective on what is studied, how it is studied, and the interpretation of results.

Positivism

Positivism as a research paradigm is described as a single objective reality that we seek to determine through factual knowledge gained by observation. For positivists, objective truth exists, and the goal of science is to uncover the truth. The researcher must be objective and

collect evidence using value-free methods (Corry et al., 2019). Positivists' rational observation of the social world was an important step in the data collection and interpretation using observable and quantifiable means. If a researcher uses positivism in the study, they act independently using deductive reasoning. The positivism research paradigm investigates the process of gathering data, observing regularities, and extracting laws using methodologies including confirmatory analysis, nomothetic experiments, quantitative analysis, laboratory experiments, and deduction (Kankam, 2019).

Post Positivism

Post-positivism is like positivism when comparing ontological and epistemological beliefs. Post-positivism is a single objective reality that we aim to determine with the general acceptance and knowledge that we never will fully understand. Post-positivism implies that knowledge is not necessarily a neutral construct, but all knowledge is socially constructed through multiple, subjective, and mentally created by individuals (Kankam, 2019). As a result, post-positivists remain steadfast in recognizing that all observation is subject to error. This paradigm accepts imperfect reality and identifies inherent biases from social interactions in the research process. Research is partly value-laden, but relevant biases are controlled as researchers are part of what is being studied and may affect the study (Winit-Watjana, 2016).

Pragmatism

The view of pragmatism is to focus on the problem that has been identified rather than the view of reality by utilizing available tools to aid in understanding. Pragmatism emphasizes shared meanings and joint actions, relying on the belief that theories can be both contextual and generalized. Pragmatism can analyze the transferability of adapting observations into theories and then assessing the theories through action (Kankam, 2019). Pragmatism is about meaning

and how the meaning of ideas lies in their consequences rather than in the ideas. The pragmatism research paradigm emphasizes what works without emphasis on methodology to allow the researchers to apply this paradigm based on more than one method for a single case study (Kankam, 2019).

Constructivism

The researcher's goal of understanding is not to discover a universal truth or human experience regarding context and value but to utilize the free flow of knowledge and truth to understand individuals' interpretations and the constructs they interact with (Kankam,2019). If one believes in multiple socially constructed realities, then the researcher aims to understand the individual's worldview based on their subjective experience. Constructivists attempt to find meanings through qualitative data rather than objective facts (Winit-Watjana, 2016). Like positivism, the goal of using constructivism to guide this research is to observe as a means of gathering information. Additionally, constructivism explores how people think, examines what people do, and how they approach problems such as distributed leadership from a social formation. Using this approach to study qualitative research in organizations allows the researcher to explore issues of ethics, leadership, and cultural factors impacting leadership.

Researcher's Paradigm: Constructivism

My research paradigm was based on constructivism. Donald Davidson wrote, "The recognition of an irreducibly normative element in all attributions of attitude" (Curry, 2020). The researcher's role is an integral part of the social construct being researched, and it is determined by the individual the researcher aims to understand. The epistemology of constructivism involves collecting knowledge on subjective meanings associated with the individuals being studied within a defined social context (Bogna et al., 2020). Constructivism is a reality created through

human interaction, and knowledge is a byproduct of that construction. Researchers are never separate from their own beliefs, so these beliefs will inevitably inform how they collect, interpret, and analyze data (Ryan, 2018).

The researcher believes that people build and interpret their own understanding and knowledge of the world through experiencing things and reflecting on those experiences. Applying a Christian viewpoint describes how people experience and believe a subjective reality based on what they think they have found in God's work in their lives. The constructivism paradigm explains that each person will interpret God's presence in our lives differently, and those personal experiences will influence how we attempt to understand His will and purpose. The view is that uncommitted and indifferent impartiality is impractical, and realism or practicality of framework and background are imperative (Kankam, 2019). The researcher recognized varying approaches to one's epistemological and ontological views of the world and religious beliefs. The varying approaches directly affect how one approaches research.

Discussion of Design

A review of fixed, flexible, and mixed methods further examined what types of research each design type is best suited to study. Additionally, a discussion of each design type demonstrated why the flexible design was the best choice for this research project. This study was conducted with a flexible design using a qualitative method; specifically, the researcher used a single case study design.

Fixed Design

Fixed designs are defined as being fully fixed as part of the research proposal. The researcher performs the research and analysis using quantitative tools, and it is usually theory driven. Fixed designs may be theory-based and utilize experimental, quasi-experimental,

nonexperimental approaches, including descriptive, correlational, or casual comparative methodologies. Fixed design is a procedurally driven method utilizing predetermined methods before starting the research process (Levitt et al., 2017). Fixed designs are mostly associated with quantitative research that is objective and numerical in nature. This method is best applied to studies that describe specific characteristics, explore the attributes' relationship, and determine the cause-and-effect relationship (Robson and McCartan, 2016). The natural sciences apply quantitative methods; the social sciences consisting of psychology, human geography, and sociology are more qualitatively oriented (Strijker et al., 2020).

Flexible Design

Flexible designs allow for freedom and variation to support studies that are not inherently quantitative. This design method is more practical for qualitative studies that do not rely on numbers. The flexible design allows the researcher to adapt the investigation, reducing wasted efforts. Additionally, the flexible design lends well to situations that require participant observation and is used in an investigative capacity. Robson and McCartan (2016) described the researcher as "having freedom in developing the qualitative questions in a descriptive, evaluative, narrative, casual, and effectual context" (p. 60). Flexible qualitative-based design methods include narrative, phenomenology, grounded theory, case study, and ethnography. The negative aspect of using a flexible design is that this design method can introduce selection bias that could diminish the validity of the results.

Mixed Methods Design

Mixed method design processes serve as the integration point that combines various types of qualitative and quantitative data research in a single study to better understand the research problem (Piccioli, 2019). A researcher must understand the applications and usefulness of

qualitative and quantitative research to effectively use this method. Mixed methods research aims to merge qualitative and quantitative components to expand and strengthen a study's conclusions and has five applications: triangulation, complementarity, development, initiation, and expansion (Schoonenboom & Johnson, 2017). Triangulation seeks corroboration of results, complementarity highlights elaboration of results, development aims to help better inform the other method, initiation seeks contradiction to see new perspectives, and expansion extends the breadth of inquiry (Schoonenboom & Johnson, 2017). Mixed methods design methods strive to include convergent parallel, explanatory sequential, exploratory sequential transformative components to strengthen the results and conclusions of the study.

Flexible Design Selection

The research design for this study supported a flexible qualitative approach allowing for more freedom during the collection process of the study. The possible lack of distributed leadership in academic organizations creating disparate hierarchical groups within higher education was explored on a social level by further dissecting individual, team, and organizational levels. Leadership functions as a crucial part of today's organizations, especially during change management, citing shared leadership to improve effectiveness (Binci et al., 2016). Leadership is focused on less tangible benefits such as behaviors, language, motivation, feelings, and values. Qualitative research focuses more on the context of situations that cannot be measured with a numerical system. This method allowed the researcher to discover themes in the research documentation to identify development opportunities provided to the individual, the team, and the organization.

Discussion of Method

Qualitative research involves different methods best suited for different types of studies. Qualitative research includes gathering and analyzing data that is non-numerical to better study and understand concepts, opinions, or experiences that provide in-depth insights into a problem or produce new thoughts for further research. Common approaches to qualitative research include narrative, phenomenological, grounded theory, ethnography, and single case study research. This research used a flexible design, using qualitative methods, specifically a single case study research design.

Narrative

In narrative research approaches, the researcher examines how stories are told to understand how participants perceive and make sense of their individual experiences. Narrative research is a form of qualitative research that prioritizes exploration by demanding the researcher get close to the subjectivities of participants' lived experiences and social constructs of reality (Abkhezr et al., 2020). This approach concentrates on participants' lives told through their own stories to determine how the person finds meaning in their experience. Narrative researchers use collaborative construction with participants by building a relationship based on rapport and trust to be empathic, nonjudgmental, concerned, tolerant, and emotionally responsive (Abkhezr et al., 2020). Narrative research focuses on the personal and the social aspects by revealing the sociocultural context of a person's story within their culture (Carless & Douglas, 2017). The research may use an open interview approach to allow participants the autonomy to discuss subjects that are important to their narrative and gain insightful data. Toledano and Anderson (2020) suggested: "by highlighting the value of subjectivity in each experience, narratives suggest that the same phenomenon may mean different things to different people; and this might

be seen as a weakness of interpretation, particularly compared with conventional logical positivism." Additionally, the process is time-consuming to collect the narrative, and the narrative may not represent a larger population, diminishing the results' impact.

Phenomenology

Phenomenology studies structures consciousness from the first-person perspective, intentionally studying how someone experiences things (Stilwell & Harman, 2021). They are not psychological states but how a person is experiencing things as they appear. Conducting research utilizing phenomenology means the study must capture descriptions of phenomena in natural settings. Phenomenology develops a multifaceted interpretation of awareness, perception awareness, self-awareness, awareness of other persons, social interaction, and everyday activity in our culture (Stilwell & Harman, 2021). Phenomenology alone is not sufficient to understand consciousness or perception fully. Phenomenology complements other fields such as biology, neurophysiology, and physical science where phenomenology can contribute to an exact science (Albertazzi, 2018).

Grounded Theory

Researchers collect rich data on a topic of interest and develop theories inductively. A grounded theory approach aims to use data from the field that concentrates on studying the process and interaction of many individuals (Creswell and Poth, 2018). Grounded theory attempts to understand the perspective of an individual who has experience of a phenomenon. The focus of grounded theory is to generate theory grounded in data and shaped by participants' views, thereby moving beyond description and towards the theoretical explanation of a process or phenomenon (Turner & Astin, 2021). Grounded theory research is an inductive process whereby the researcher develops a theory rather than testing it and must remain open throughout

the study (Turner & Astin, 2021). The researcher has no defined thoughts about the results before beginning the analysis that occurs during data collection.

Ethnography

Ethnography is a technique that allows researchers to immerse themselves in groups or organizations to better understand the individuals and culture being studied through direct observation or interviewing. Most ethnographies are based on fieldwork that involves a substantial amount of participant observation. The investigators interact with the people being studied in a manner that replicates their way of life to gain an intuitive view of the culture (Walle, 2016). Ethnography is a process and a creation that can take a long time to develop and may never be finished as social connections constantly evolve. The ethnographer actively participates in the group to gain an insider's perspective and have similar experiences. The ethnographer creates an account of the group, interviews individuals, and conducts an analysis. A weakness of this qualitative approach is consigning ethnography to cultural relativism or regressive self-analysis, thus leading to the discouraging conclusion that nothing but discourse exists in the final analysis (Townsend & Cushion, 2021).

Case Study

A single case study focuses on a specific set of participants to create a generalized overview to help the researcher understand this contextual environment. The studies can be exploratory, descriptive, or explanatory. Case studies are a realistic look at real life subjects in a holistic view. Single case studies provide an alternative to large group studies that are time-consuming or consume larger amounts of resources. A single qualitative case study is a research methodology that aids in exploring a phenomenon within some context through various data sources. It undertakes the exploration through various lenses to reveal multiple facets of the

phenomenon (Rashid et al., 2019). The case study is helpful in testing theories and describing topics that are internal to academic institutions. Descriptive approaches to leadership studies, such as conceptual analysis, case studies, survey research, and lab experiments, cannot on their own tell what leaders must do to be successful (Flanigan, 2017). A single case study approach is the conclusion developed by the research aimed at synthesizing or providing a confirmable way to demonstrate the outcomes the researcher is recommending. Multiple case studies involve utilizing more than one case study. Multiple case studies attempt to produce a more convincing theory grounded in empirical evidence from several sources to offer a broad and generalized result.

Appropriateness of Single Case Study

Single case studies define the beginning of modern psychology, psychiatry, neurology, and the cognitive sciences as sources of new hypotheses about human behavior. They incentivize intensive studies of rare phenomena, clinical innovations, corroborate psychological theories, and challenge theoretical assumptions (Bao et al., 2017). The first research question looked at a broad view of why leaders fail to apply distributed leadership. This question required the view of flexibility through an inherited fluid social reality of hierarchical leadership models. The researcher identifies the themes and conducts the analysis allowing for flexibility in the methodology selection. Themes can easily emerge from reviewing the research data, but the researcher must choose the narrative descriptions that make sense for the proposed questions. The second question explored how student outcome initiatives are different from focused administrative projects. A qualitative case study collects data that best answers the research questions compared with all methods and designs before selecting an option that aligns with the research goal. Case study research offers diversity in data collection methods and analytical

techniques such as incorporating interviews, observation, and surveys. Question three aimed to focus more specifically on the fundamental pieces of distributed leadership present in organizations that successfully implement change to improve student outcomes. The narrative approach sought to build support for a generalized persona of the organizational culture that adopts changes to support student outcomes. Case study research encourages methods that measure discerning research over a period that reveals different perspectives when coupled with triangulation of results. Bao et al. (2017) explained that single case studies contribute to the richness of research. Neglecting single case studies would deprive the scientific landscape of a better understanding of cognitive processes.

Discussion of Triangulation

Triangulation is a technique that aims to increase both the reliability and legitimacy of the findings presented in the research. Triangulation, as a form of corroboration, has long been asserted to achieve a degree of validity or confidence in the study's findings (Farquhar et al., 2020). Reliability is concerned with how trustworthy and dependable a study is, and legitimacy is concerned with the validity of accurately reflecting the ideas and concepts being investigated in the research. Triangulation is useful for confirming and finding similarities and parallels between results obtained using different methods (Piccioli, 2019). Triangulation attempts to combine theories and methods in a study to help ensure the study is not hindered by fundamental biases arising from using a single method or observer. Triangulation aims to explore and explain complex behavior through various methods to offer a more unbiased and aligned explanation that validates both quantitative and qualitative studies. The rationale for using cross-methods triangulation is to overcome bias, increase the level of understanding of phenomena, and increase the study's validity (Renz et al., 2018).

Qualitative Methods for Triangulation

To improve case study quality, the researcher needs access to raw data, explanation of negative cases, multiple data sources, links between theory and evidence of data triangulation (Farquhar et al., 2020). The role of triangulation is validation through the conjunction of sources to check the study's validity. Data or source triangulation uses data from a variety of sources. Source triangulation uses interviews from different informers at different times, assuming that several sources, varied by time, place, or other variables contribute to the degree of convergent validity or enhanced confidence (Farquhar et al., 2020). Researcher triangulation is when two or more researchers interpret evidence conventionally to arrive at an agreement that eliminates bias (Farquhar et al., 2020). The third type of triangulation is theoretical. Theoretical triangulation is where insight is gained from looking at data sets from different theoretical perspectives, which consists of defining theoretical perspectives to be used, data analysis using theoretical lenses, and theory-building to account for the divergent explanations (Farquhar et al., 2020). Unit triangulation refers to evaluating the various units of analysis in the research. Unit triangulation has strong links with sampling in case study research, where cases or units of analysis are chosen based on their possibility of creating a new theory (Farquhar et al., 2020).

This case study utilized the data or source triangulation method that provided triangulation from different informers, and that variation contributed to the validity or confidence of this study. Case study research lends well to the recommended practice of using data triangulation. Data triangulation combines text, survey, and interview data to explore analytical angles across time, space, or person (Kern, 2018). Case studies may utilize multiple methods within the data source triangulation, such as interviews, focus groups, and observations to test validity. This study focused on utilizing interviews and observations by comparing multiple

sources to collect data from varying situations and different levels of experience and expertise. This study included interviews to gain insight into what the individuals perceive as outcomes related to distributed leadership. The study interviewed individuals from various departmental groups; triangulation occurred by determining what outcomes were agreed upon by all the various group members participating in the interviews. The interview evidence across departments suggested that if every group explores an issue from varying points of view, it is more likely to validate the research.

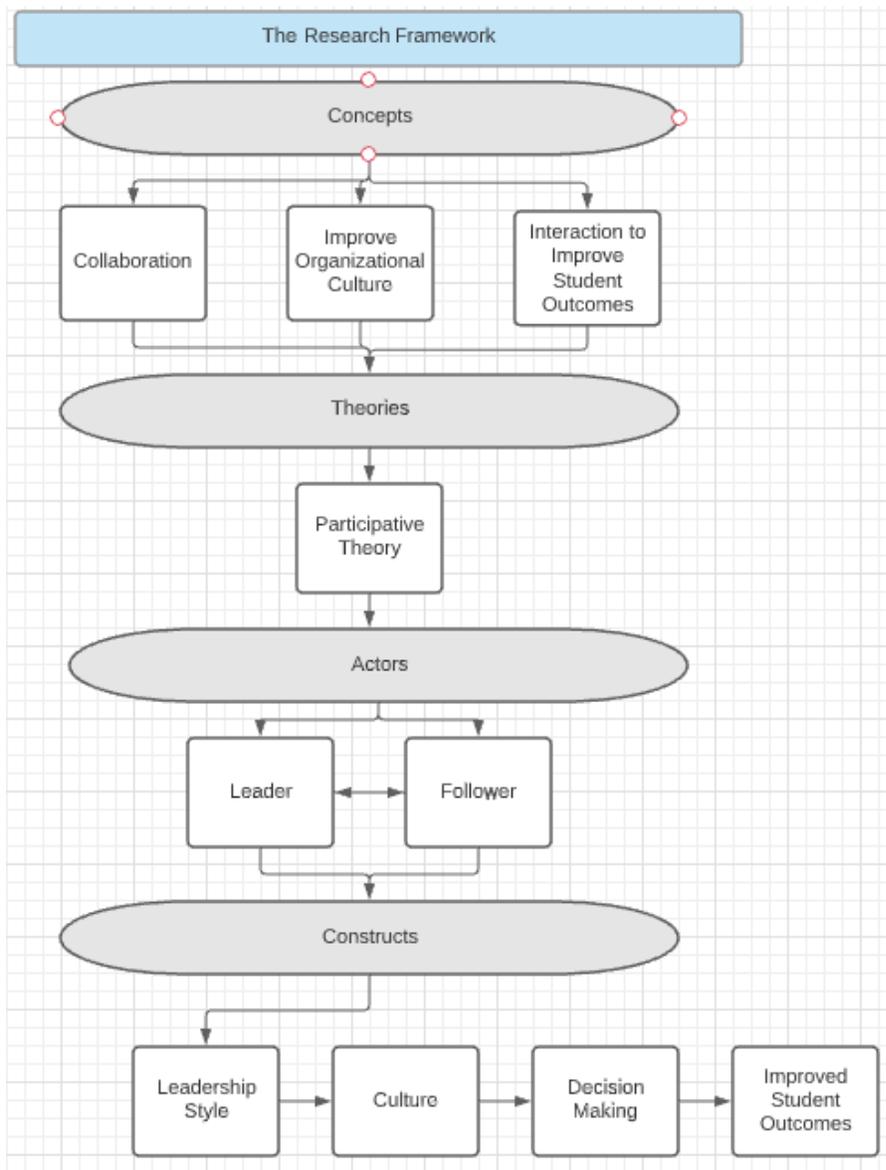
Summary of the Nature of the Study

The overarching aim of qualitative research is to understand certain social phenomena by studying and collecting empirical materials to define moments and meanings in individuals' lives (Renz et al., 2018). The nature of this study utilized qualitative research to understand the complexities of distributed leadership. The research paradigm shapes how the researcher approaches the problem based on how the individual conducting the research views the world. The methodology and design explore how the researcher plans to study the problem at a high level by understanding each design type and how it is used in specific applications. This case study utilized the data triangulation method by conducting interviews and observational methods to provide triangulation from different informers. The data triangulation method utilized the variation across departments to contribute to the validity of this study. The constructivism paradigm, flexible qualitative method, and case study design are best for exploring the details of individual and organizational experiences. It was also used to identify themes within the context of the participants in higher education to identify what makes organizations with distributed leadership successful in implementing changes that positively improve student outcomes in West Virginia.

The Research Framework

The use of the research framework delivers a comprehensive underlying structure to support the researcher's collective effort. The framework is first defined, then a diagram supports the visualization of how the study is connected to the literature. A research framework contains concepts that, when combined with their definitions and applications, help strengthen the study. The theoretical framework is purposefully constructed from multiple components. The researcher should create the framework as a vital part of conceptualizing and conducting the research (Cai et al., 2019). The inclusion of a visualized diagram helps the reader see the problem more clearly. The diagram displays the various inputs and links that connect the actors, concepts, constructs, and theories to the output. The framework supports three kinds of justifications: the purpose of the study, the how of the study, and the what to help illustrate the structure of the research plan (Cai et al., 2019).

Distributed leadership relies on collaboration through shared responsibility, autonomy, and accountability throughout the team. Researchers argue it is beyond the capacity of a single leader to deal with all issues within schools successfully. The principal or president plays a crucial role in achieving success, but leadership is not only derived from the president (Liu et al., 2020). Leadership occurs beyond positions that have an institution-wide or institutional departmental accountability. There is a shift in the leadership studies field that decentralized leadership from the individual perspective where the leader is equated to leadership, embracing a more distributed, shared, and collaborative approach beyond these individuals (Youngs, 2017). This diagram examined the relationship between leaders' and follower's collaboration and explored how participative theory influences culture and decision making to improve student outcomes.

Figure 1.*Research framework****Concepts***

The following section includes a list of the concepts associated with the research.

Concepts included commonly held opinions or viewpoints that may not be as formally defined as theories. Concepts are found in the literature central to the research problem being explored.

Distributed Leadership Relies on Collaboration

Radvany (2021) suggested today's workplaces depend on collaboration among multiple specialized contributors and increasingly focus on leveraging the leadership capabilities distributed throughout the team. Distributed leadership shares responsibility, autonomy, and accountability throughout the team. Researchers argue it is beyond the capacity of a single leader to deal with all issues within schools successfully. The principal or president plays a crucial role in achieving success, but leadership is not only derived from the president (Liu et al., 2020). Leadership occurs beyond any individual position, suggesting successful organizations must have institution-wide or institutional departmental accountability. There is a shift in the leadership studies field that supports the use of decentralized leadership. The shift from the individual leader perspective where the leader is equated to leadership must transition to one that also embraces a more distributed, shared, and collaborative approach beyond these individuals (Youngs, 2017). This leadership approach is by expertise and experience rather than leadership by title or traditional hierarchy. Leadership must account for social interactions in a complex dynamic environment (Turner et al., 2018). A distributed leadership approach works when individuals who trust and respect each other's contributions create an open culture and collaborative environment. Distributed leadership shifts influence away from the top of the organizational hierarchy towards the work teams by promoting values such as listening, concern and understanding, dialog, teamwork, and creation of forums where everyone has a voice (Sales et al., 2017). Collaboration can only truly occur when the culture supports a diverse network, provides realistic feedback, a partnership is valued, and the environment supports opportunities for individuals to practice leadership related to their area of expertise.

Distributed Leadership Improves Organizational Culture

Achieving organizational excellence begins with implementing structures, organizations, and methodologies, supported by tools and strategies to attain a desired corporate culture (Joseph & Bogue, 2018). The leadership in the organization influences the interactions and dynamics of the organizational culture. Leadership styles strongly affect culture because employees tend to act in ways that mimic their leader's behaviors (Vrdoljak & Borovac, 2017). Shared leadership relies on a context of trust and a culture of respect through building collegial, collaborative relationships to improve quality (Carbone et al., 2017). Distributed leadership is a democratic and participative leadership style. In an educational context, distributed leadership focuses on producing mechanisms where employees can demonstrate collective responsibility and share a learning culture (Bashir et al., 2017). The organization's culture finds opportunities to create, acquire, and transfer knowledge as well as modify behavior to reflect new knowledge and apply that to the needs of the organization (Bashir et al., 2017). It is important to understand how autonomy and empowerment improve organizations' culture to also increase productivity and engagement. Teamwork is developed through an understanding of the role, value of team leadership, belief in the power of collaboration, increased interest and commitment to cooperation, team building, and team unity (Turner et al., 2018). Organizational culture can be consciously designed, and leadership is a crucial factor in the adaptation process to encourage and promote change (Vrdoljak & Borovac, 2017).

Interaction to Improve Student Outcomes

The success of higher education institutions depends on the ability to interpret paradigm shifts and learn to adapt effectively. The challenge is sustainability and flexibility over time (Raimondo, 2021). Distributed leadership means sharing leadership expertise at all levels in the

education system to create more opportunities for change and capacity for improvement. Academic optimism has consistently been shown to positively impact student achievement regardless of socioeconomic background in various contexts (Oldac & Kondakci, 2020). The focus is shifted to interdependent interaction rather than focusing on individual and independent actions associated with formal roles. By improving the dynamics of interactions to promote honesty, the academic institution fosters dialog that facilitates improving student outcomes.

Professional development initiatives build leadership capacity among faculty through mentorship and collaboration to improve the quality of teaching and student satisfaction (Carbone et al., 2017). When teachers have opportunities to engage in professional discourse, collaboration, and distributed leadership, they become interconnected variables that can work together to improve student achievement (Oldac & Kondakci, 2020). Creating a safe environment allows employees to feel comfortable sharing ideas, and the best ideas come from those experienced in their job. It is only when a culture supports employee ideas that the team and organization benefit. In many cases, the success and adoption of educational changes is shaped by teachers' capacity, professional self-esteem, and degree of autonomy to innovate and be creative in recommending innovative solutions to improve schools (Sales et al., 2017).

Theories

The following section includes theories related to the research. The researcher found these formal theories in the literature, and they were central to the research problem.

Participative Theory

Participative theory suggests that the leadership style should allow employees to be involved directly with the organization's decision-making in an organizational setting. Participative leadership is paralleled to democratic, distributed, or shared leadership.

Participative management theory is a style of leadership that shares power and authority between a leader and the employees. Participative management theory is one of the most effective management or leadership practices. This theory describes the relationship between participative leadership and employee participation concerning decision-making in an organization (Mohammed Shaed, 2018). The leader facilitates and openly shares through conversation while taking suggestions from employees; that dialog produces the best possible solutions. The hierarchy boundaries have been removed because the employees share values and goals. Participative leadership increases team creativity and encourages follower influence on decision-making and work unit operations, such as consulting with followers and taking their opinions when making decisions (Li et al., 2018). The benefit to the organization is the improved quality of decision making, more comprehensive issues, and acceptance of decisions by employees due to direct involvement. Moreover, this practice increases employee satisfaction and enhances employees' skills in decision-making (Mohammed Shaed, 2018).

Actors

The following section describes the actors found in this research. The actors were defined as the people groups or organizations related to the research study.

Leader Follower Interaction

Distributed leadership is viewed as a product of the interactions of school leaders, followers, and their situations (Liu et al., 2020). Leadership is defined as the influence between leaders and followers that aligns behaviors needed to accomplish organizational goals. Effective leaders do not accomplish things by issuing commands but by building commitment and personal engagement with followers. One of the main tasks for most leaders is interacting with their followers and shaping engagement (Gutermann et al., 2017). It has been acknowledged that

the effects of leaders on followers may result not only from the exposure to positive leadership styles such as inspiring and motivating leadership but also from destructive leadership behaviors such as aggression and authoritarianism (Montano et al., 2017). Leadership aims to influence followers to do more, empower followers to take risks, or create motivation and commitment. In favorable interactions, leaders develop an authentic relationship with followers and have high mutual trust, respect, and confidence.

Leaders

Leaders recognize they cannot make all the decisions, and some decisions are best made by those most familiar with the processes. The participation or responsibility of middle managers in the strategy formulation process is viewed as a major source of incentives to support and advance the successful implementation of a strategy (Guggenberger & Rohlfing-Bastian, 2016). Everyone in the institution must be responsible for implementing strategic initiatives that promote student success outcomes. Shared power, autonomy, and responsibility are given to those lower in the hierarchical structure. The absence of a leader's control, due to the sharing distribution, collectivism, networking, and self-organizing, contributes to employees' knowledge (Amar & Hlupic, 2016).

Followers

Followers sense the leader's sincerity, commitment, and engagement and allow themselves to be led. Participative leadership increases team creativity and encourages follower influence on decision-making and work unit operations, such as consulting with followers and taking followers' opinions when making decisions (Li et al., 2018). Followers' motivation to follow leaders who share their power is due to trust, charisma, and self-efficacy. Distributed leadership for followers becomes a product of interaction, tension, exchange rules governing the

changes in perceptions, and understanding of the responsibility of tasks in an organization (Amar & Hlupic, 2016).

Constructs

The following section describes the constructs of this research. Constructs are broad concepts or topics that are used to express ideas, people, events, or objects related to the study.

Leadership Style

Bormann and Rowold (2018) described constructs related to leadership styles, including transformational, transactional, authentic, servant, charismatic, and laissez-faire approaches to leadership. These leadership styles or behaviors can be evaluated to determine effective or ineffective behaviors based on specific situations. The leader's willingness to share power influences the decision-making processes, culture, and success of initiatives. Leadership style is a function of a leader's cultural intelligence; the nature and extent of the role played by the leader's cultural intelligence varies between leadership styles in general (Solomon & Steyn, 2017). The construct is the underlying theme or subject matter that the researcher wants to measure. Northouse (2018) states that the basic determinant of management is the establishment of order and consistency, while the goal of leadership is to cause change and movement by creating a vision, determining strategy, directing, and motivating people. In this study, leaders' leadership styles and following traits and behaviors are examined to determine how leadership styles influence people, culture, and change adoption.

Organizational Culture

A relationship exists between organizational culture and the commitment of workers. Organizational culture is important in defining a company's identity. Some of the common attributes of organizational culture include social constructs that hold a company together, shared

assumptions, norms, values, and beliefs necessary to improve the implementation of change to improve performance (Wijethilake et al., 2021). Culture can increase productivity, decrease turnover, increase engagement to extract the best possible work from each team member.

Organizational culture influences the likelihood of the successful implementation and permanent adoption of change strategies necessary for sustainability in the global market. Leadership styles strongly affect corporate culture because employees tend to act in ways that mirror their leaders (Vrdoljak Raguž & Borovac Zekan, 2017). According to Tan (2019), measuring organizational culture using the case study method provides solid construct validity. It also allows the researcher to analyze rich data that cannot be fully specified before data collection begins.

Culture plays a vital role in determining the success or failure of organizations' change towards sustainability (Wijethilake et al., 2021).

Relationship Between Concepts, Theories, Actors, and Constructs

The research framework aimed to demonstrate the structure of the research to be conducted regarding distributed leadership. The research questions explored the relationship between the concepts, theories, actors, and constructs. The concepts explored included distributed leadership's reliance on collaboration to be successful, to improve organizational culture, and interaction to improve student outcomes. The initial relationship explored was that of the leader and follower. The research looked at the relationship of trust and respect to create shared responsibility, autonomy, and accountability. The research framework attempted to explore how the relationship between leaders and followers contributed to a collaborative or distributed leadership environment. Next, participative theory provided a starting point for examining how relationships build collaboration and improve culture. The researcher explored the representation of leaders and followers as actors and the interaction between the two types.

Next, the constructs broadly explored leadership style and organizational culture. The framework helped to structure the research in a way that examined the hierarchal flow. The leader-follower interaction influences collaboration, which is impacted by participative theory. Collaboration and participative theory influence the organization's decision-making and directly impact student outcomes.

Summary of the Research Framework

The research framework outlined in this investigation provided the structure to support the research study. The framework described the concepts with definitions and existing theories for the study. The introductory paragraph explained the importance of the framework and linked it to the study of distributed leadership within higher education institutions. A diagram provided the visual aid to better help the reader understand the flow of the framework. The concepts, theories, actors, constructs, and relationships provided understanding and analysis to investigate the relationships found in the research. Institutions struggle with hierarchical structures that result in the potential inability to implement changes that improve student outcomes successfully.

Distributed leadership can share responsibility, accountability, and authority across the team by empowering those with the knowledge, skills, and expertise to participate in critical decision-making. The transition from a senior leader model to that of the knowledge worker can influence the organization's overall strategy and goals. Distributed leadership encourages a culture that values team members, grows the future generation of leaders, and potentially improves the organization. The research framework provided a comprehensive plan to guide this research project's conceptual basis for understanding.

Definition of Terms

This section contained the definitions retrieved from scholarly sources and cited accordingly.

This list contains terms that the reader might not understand and is not meant to be an exhaustive list of definitions.

Constructivism: The researcher's goal of understanding is not to discover a universal truth or human experience regarding context and value, but to utilize the free flow of knowledge and truth to understand individuals' interpretations and the constructs they interact with (Kankam, 2019).

Distributed Leadership: Distributed leadership is the practice of leadership sharing responsibilities and empowering team members with the related skills and demonstrating the expertise needed to lead (Bashir et al., 2017).

Leadership Style: Leadership style is a function of a leader's cultural intelligence; the nature and extent of the role played by the leader's cultural intelligence varies between leadership styles in general. The goal of leadership is to cause change and movement by creating a vision, strategy, direction, and motivating people (Solomon & Steyn, 2017).

Organizational Culture: Organizational culture is the common attributes of organizational culture include social constructs that hold a company together; shared assumptions, norms, values, and beliefs necessary to improve the implementation of change to improve performance (Wijethilake et al., 2021)

Participative theory: This theory describes the relationship between participative leadership and employee participation with regard to decision-making in the organization (Mohammed Shaed, 2018).

Research Paradigm: This perspective typically reflects the individual researcher's beliefs about the world they live in and want to live in (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017).

Triangulation: Triangulation is a technique to increase the reliability and legitimacy of the findings presented in the research as a form of corroboration to achieve a degree of confidence (Farquhar et al., 2020).

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

This section describes the boundaries and possible limitations of this research study. This section provided an introductory paragraph that introduced each category and how it may have influenced the study. Assumptions pertain to the facts presented in the research that are true but are not verified in the study. Assumptions inherently carry a level of risk to the study and should be identified and supported by appropriate research material. Additionally, a risk mitigation strategy is presented for each assumption to limit the effects of the risk. Limitations are considered a restrictive factor that contributes to the potential weaknesses of the study. Limitations carry risk to the research and should be identified and supported by appropriate research material. Additionally, a risk mitigation strategy is presented for each restriction to limit the effects of the risk. Delimitations are the boundary or scope settings in the study that the researcher sets. A description of the boundaries and how they impacted the study were discussed. Limitations and delimitations are necessary as they allow the researcher and audience to put the findings in a contextual framework that increases the validity of the research.

Assumptions

Assumptions are facts often considered true but not verified by research. The following assumptions were considerations for this research project. Assumptions pertaining to qualitative studies include the realities of the researcher, participants, and audience. Four themes reflecting underlying assumptions about the purposes of research that have implications were identified as theory generalization, representation, participation, and change (Thomas, 2017). The researcher

also assumed that participants in the case study were transparent and provided accurate information when describing leadership experiences and styles. Trust is built upon relationships through interaction that influences how trustworthy we appear. Conducting research in some circumstances provides challenges due to shame, embarrassment, or fear; research participants in conflict and post-conflict environments are guarded and can deliberately distort information (Celestina, 2018). This study was conducted using a constructivist worldview to explore the participants' view on reality; the researcher believed that people build and interpret their own understanding and knowledge of the world through experiencing things and reflecting on those experiences (Kankam, 2019). Additionally, the researcher assumed that the experience being described by the participants was a truthful record of their experience and not a third-hand account of someone else's experience. Researchers engage with participants who have the power to decide what kind of information they share with the researcher, what detail to include, or how to frame a story in a way to produce a certain type of narrative (Celestina, 2018).

Limitations

Limitations refer to potential weaknesses of the study presented by limiting factors that influence the validity or reliability of the research study. Limitations are influencing factors that are outside of the control of the researcher. Additionally, limitations have the potential to influence the findings and contribute to weaknesses that adversely impact the study outcomes or practical application. Limitations of this research included:

- The sample size and selection.
- Individual characteristics and traits of participants.
- The limited research studies on this specific topic that were needed for comparative analysis.

Qualitative interview studies may benefit from sampling strategies by shifting attention to the contribution of new knowledge from the analysis rather than a numerical strategy for validation (Malterud et al., 2016).

In quantitative studies, calculations determine the appropriate sample size (N) necessary to demonstrate effects; for qualitative interview studies, no similar standards for sample size assessment exist (Malterud et al., 2016). The sample size in a case study can vary, but a standard mathematical equivalent has not yet been identified for qualitative studies. Another limitation was the level of understanding related to leadership concepts on behalf of the researcher and participant. The individuals only knew a fixed level of information regarding leadership processes, and at the time of the research, this level of knowledge contributed to a limitation. The development of formative feedback around distributed leadership tasks was an iterative process constrained by the framing of the survey and the researcher's understanding of distributed leadership practices in schools (Kelley & Dikkers, 2016).

Delimitations

Delimitations refer to the boundary conditions set by the researcher in the study. Delimitations allow the researcher to determine what is included and excluded from the study. Qualitative researchers should try to make methods as defensible as possible, targeting intersubjectivity on why and how decisions regarding design, sampling, and analysis were made (Malterud et al., 2016). Delimitations are within the researcher's control and can assist in narrowing the focus of the study to make it appropriate to what the researcher is attempting to prove. This research study has parameter conditions that focus on a specific subset of an educational population. This study does not cover education institutions outside of West Virginia. This study is limited to public higher education institutions within West Virginia.

Private higher education institutions and other remaining states have been excluded from the study to explore a cross-section of the education industry. These specific delimitations have been set as boundary conditions to focus on a study that can potentially offer practical improvements to a subset of higher education institutions in West Virginia. West Virginia public higher education is governed by the West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission (WV HEPC). "The Commission develops and oversees a public policy agenda for West Virginia's four-year colleges and universities" (West Virginia Institutions, 2021). The WV HEPC provides standards and guidelines for institutions to accomplish their missions and carry out state procedures that allow this research to apply to those institutions that are part of the state's purview.

Significance of the Study

In this section, the researcher provides the reason and rationale for conducting the research. The significance of the study explained why the researcher decided to conduct the research and what value the research attempted to provide. The reduction of gaps in the literature discussed how this research could be utilized as an attempt to fill gaps, add to the understanding and effective practice of leadership, and contribute to the existing body of leadership knowledge. The implications for biblical integration provided a connection between biblical principles and the concepts of this research. The benefit and relationship to leadership practice explained how the research relates to leadership as a role or function.

Reduction of the Gaps in the Literature

There are gaps of knowledge in the research field pertaining to distributed leadership practices in higher education, specifically, West Virginia's public higher education institutions. Leaders can use distributed leadership to bring about change, which is reflected in other scholarly literature sources. A systematic review of the research literature focused on key

evidence as a blended approach that can inform practice and policy in education. The previously published articles about distributed leadership offer a more comprehensive approach that requires further research. This approach can contribute to the practical application needed to improve student outcomes in today's volatile higher education business environment. Higher education is burdened with advancing from a focus on assessment as a measurement of outputs and transition to a multifaceted focus that encompasses the influence of initiatives across all aspects of academic endeavors, including research, learning, teaching, and leadership (Jones et al., 2017). The research presented in this study aimed to have valuable practical and theoretical suggestions that institutions can adopt. It is only through an exhaustive literature review for journal articles that the true breadth of the works can help the researcher identify these gaps.

The leadership studies field has grown and experienced some conceptual restructuring of leadership and has focused on the distribution of leadership and collaborative configurations of work arrangements in higher education institutions (Youngs, 2017). The debate regarding leadership in higher education, especially distributed leadership, connects leadership phenomena to an overarching organizational perspective (Sewerin & Holmberg, 2017). However, little research explored how distributed leadership in higher education can remove hierarchical cultural boundaries to improve student outcomes and help institutions overcome challenges positively.

Distributed leadership is positioned as a framework that embraces and encourages employees to participate with each other to achieve change, creating an atmosphere to overcome problems and enhance the capacities of individuals to lead aligns with the organizational culture (Youngs, 2017). This study provided a more granular approach that could be implemented in an educational environment to positively influence change outcomes for students in West Virginia.

This study addressed the gaps in the literature by demonstrating the impact of leadership in public higher education. Closing the gap requires measuring individual leaders' skills, behaviors, and achievements to demonstrate how universities can evaluate the effects of actions taken to build leadership capacity across the institution (Jones et al., 2017). Additionally, the research conducted in this study helped develop the understanding and effective practice of distributed leadership and contribute to the existing distributed leadership body of knowledge.

Implications for Biblical Integration

Christian leaders apply biblical principles in everyday life. Christian researchers attempt to identify underlying principles of the Bible that may guide and inform the practice of research. "I will instruct thee and teach thee in the way which thou shalt go I will guide thee with mine eye." (King James Bible, 1769/2017, Psalms 32:8). God provides direction and counsel on how His followers should live and make decisions. The benefit of conducting this research was to support ways in which we can become better servants of Christ. The existence of one's ontological, epistemological, and religious views of the world attempts to explain reality and justify why that belief is correct. As a researcher, we develop the theories that explain our worldview through our individual view of reality.

A Christian perspective of conducting research requires biblical application throughout the process. God's followers integrate faith and belief into every aspect of their lives, including research. As a constructivist, the researcher posited that people experience and believe a subjective reality. Christians view God's work and purpose in their lives based on their foundational religious beliefs. God teaches us in the Bible what is right or wrong, what pleases Him and displeases Him, and how to obey and do His will. As a researcher, the goal is to allow each person to interpret God's presence differently and combine those individual experiences in

the research. This view articulates that uncommitted and indifferent impartiality is impractical and realism or practicality of framework and background are imperative (Kankam, 2019). The researcher recognized the existence of varying approaches of epistemological, ontological, and religious views of the world and how it directly affects how one approaches research.

The research aimed to fulfill God's purpose for me. He has given me a gift of leadership and influence that can be used to help others be better servants of Christ. The goal of servant-leaders is to work to meet the ultimate needs of those they come into contact. Moreover, leaders are called to help others grow wiser, freer, healthier, and more autonomous (Song & Ferch, 2020). The qualities of servant leaders such as integrity, resilience, and stewardship lend well to my role as a leader and using the talents that He has given. Christian leaders recognize that all people are valuable to God, and they aim to help guide those to serve God's glory. This research aimed to better understand distributed leadership in higher education. As a result of this research, the impact was to provide practical knowledge to help higher education institutions positively impact employees and students alike. If these individuals find a way to serve Him with purpose, whether with their careers or education, then this research is helping to fulfill God's plan. "As every man hath received the gift, even so minister the same one to another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God" (King James Bible, 1769/2017, 1 Peter 4:10).

Benefit and Relationship to Leadership Practice

This research was related to a leadership function and benefited a specific leadership style that can be applied to education. The findings of this research can be applied to other industries with further research. As the global business environment shifts, higher education institutions' long stable hierarchical leadership approach must also shift. There is a vast amount of potential for distributed leadership to directly contribute to authentic improvement,

transformation, and change necessary to keep higher education a solvent business in the future. No other leadership concept has caused much controversy, angst, and debate as distributed leadership (Harris & DeFlaminis, 2016). The market is less dependent upon task work and has moved to an environment that values knowledge. Hierarchical leadership models do not lend well to this new knowledge worker environment. Distributed forms of leadership serve as decision-making practices performed by staff at multiple levels instead of by a single individual (Bellibas et al., 2020). While researchers work in educational fields, there appears to be a disconnection between the research findings and the implementation of distributed leadership in this environment. This research aimed to further develop the knowledge base and provide guidance to implement distributed leadership practices in the industry.

This study further explored distributed leadership practices to add additional value to the field of leadership by linking how the application of distributed leadership influences workplace culture and ultimately impacts student outcomes. If student outcomes do not improve, higher education will continue to see a decline in enrollment and the devaluing of the service and products being offered. Unquestionably, more empirical research work about the actual practice of distributed leadership is urgently needed (Harris & DeFlaminis, 2016). New perspectives, additional accounts, and contemporary interpretations of distributed leadership enrich the knowledge base; therefore, distributed leadership remains a resilient and practical leadership concept to investigate (Harris & DeFlaminis, 2016).

Summary of the Significance of the Study

The significance of this study explained the value the research attempted to provide. The contribution of the work aimed to reduce the gaps in the knowledge base regarding distributed leadership. The research on distributed leadership provided an application related to leadership

function and benefits for the industry. The higher education environment is changing, and as a result, the industry must look for ways to improve the student experience to remain competitive. There currently exist gaps of knowledge in the field of leadership. The concept that distributed leadership can be used to influence change is reflected in other scholarly sources of literature but previously published articles offer a more comprehensive approach. There is less research published on specific industries and less research on how outcomes are linked in that industry.

This study built upon biblical application by examining God's will by researching how different leaders can become better servants of Christ. We become better servants of Christ by helping others find their purpose, and distributed leadership helps others become more aligned with His purpose for them. The researcher further explored distributed leadership practices to add additional value to the field of leadership. Distributed leadership provides the environment that embraces and encourages employees to participate in a larger capacity to achieve change. Through this creation of a culture that promotes individual experience rather than title or power, an organization can overcome problems and enhance the abilities of individuals to lead. Organizational efficiency can be enhanced by sharing the power and decision-making processes across the organization. The value of this research demonstrated how the application of distributed leadership could influence the workplace culture and ultimately impact student outcomes in higher education. This leadership style ensures students have the best experience during their knowledge attainment journey.

A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

The review of the professional and academic literature provided the reader with a comprehensive overview of the main elements of the previous research necessary to support the background to the study. The main purpose of this literature review was to connect the existing

knowledge to the research study being presented. This research project aimed to add new knowledge and fill the gap. The study had to rely on the foundation and connection to the general knowledge. The literature review created the connection for this study. The review provided a holistic view by illustrating the problem from all sides of the discussion. The literature review presents the researcher's viewpoint but should also provide supporting and opposing scholarly material. This section begins by reviewing leadership practices related to the study, a review of the problem, concepts, theories, constructs, related studies, anticipated themes, and discovered themes found in the existing body of research.

The literature review utilized current research within the past five years and attempted to identify theories, methods, and gaps in the existing body of scholarly research. Sewerin and Holmberg (2017) supported Youngs' (2017) approach by describing how an absence of distributed leadership can negatively affect leadership practices related to institutional logic on education, research, formal organization, culture, and boundary spanning environments. The leadership practices section detailed scholarly material surrounding the leadership practices related to strategic planning, leadership style, developing new leaders, team empowerment, and culture. Distributed leadership focuses on sharing responsibility across the team by empowering those with the expertise to participate in key decision-making that influences the organization's overall strategy. Distributed leadership encourages a culture that values team members, grows the future generation of leaders, and improves the economic sustainability of the organization. Youngs (2017) stated that education reform has not been successful because institutions focus on individual leadership perspectives, demonstrating how institutions without distributed leadership are missing a critical connection essential to positively impacting student outcomes. Brower et al. (2020) further supported these views by explaining that higher education institutions with

democratic data cultures tend to have distributed leadership that encourages information sharing among staff to inform and implement change. The problem statement described the purpose of the study by reviewing whether there is a lack of distributed leadership in academic organizations. This problem creates disparate hierarchical groups resulting in the inability of academic institutions to successfully implement changes that improve student outcomes. The concepts included commonly held views that were not formalized, such as that of theories. Theories were the formal theoretical foundations found in the literature that were central to the problem of distributed leadership. The constructs focused on broad concepts and topics found in the research to support the study. The related studies detailed other research that presented similar and disparate viewpoints to strengthen the literature review. Next, the anticipated themes detailed recurring themes in the research that were known prior to the study. The discovered themes section documented the additional themes that were uncovered during the research for the literature review. Lastly, the summary provided a one-page generalized overview of all the materials covered in the literature review.

Leadership Practices

When reviewing research regarding leadership, a recurring theme is that of leadership practices and skills. A leader is anyone who has the abilities, skills, and desire to influence, regardless of title. The most common definition of leadership involves influencing, motivating, enabling, and empowering others to achieve a specific goal (Reed et al., 2019). Leaders set the tone of the culture and are responsible for reinforcing values (Walter et al., 2017). Leadership practices impact strategic planning, culture, building new leaders, and empowering teams. Leadership is dynamic and complex and based on interactions between leaders and followers (Walter et al., 2017). The theme of how leadership practices impact an organization occurs

regularly throughout the literature by describing the effects on organizational outcomes and practices. School leadership has been deemed a vital factor for creating and sustaining functional schools, indicating that leadership styles influence student learning and learning preconditions within schools (Pietsch & Tulowitzki, 2017). Effective leadership is fundamental to building great companies. God uses his judgment to train Abraham in righteousness and justice. Abraham's leadership provides a template for business leaders to implement a tone at the top based on a balance of virtue and fairness (Fischer & Friedman, 2019). A positive organizational culture creates a foundation of meaningful work, appreciation, happiness, and connection. Leadership practices model the way, share vision, challenge, enable, and create an environment that encourages everyone to do their best work.

Strategic Planning

A central theme within leadership practices is strategic planning. Leadership provides the governance and direction for an organization. It determines where the organization is going, what it is going to do, and how it will get there. Strategic planning exploits leadership skills that require vigilance in anticipating opportunities, threats, and market trends. Planning, as a key management activity, empowers the realization of company goals in the future (Djordjevic et al., 2020). Effective leaders must have the capacity to envision what will be necessary going forward to solve problems or reach new goals (Walters et al., 2017). One of the key leadership skills is planning; quality planning is necessary to ensure excellence in the organization (Djordjevic et al., 2020). Leaders are the ones making the strategic plans for the organization's future.

Planning Culture

Clever leaders use strategic planning to create engagement within the labor force and to increase leadership abilities across the entire organization. The strategic layer of organizational

structures and processes includes strategy, mission, and vision changes. The identity layer includes changes in the organizational culture divided into internal and external (Vrdoljak Raguž & Borovac Zekan, 2017). Leaders guide the organization toward future states by creating the best possible path for the company's long-term goals and success, including culture. There is limited research describing how leadership can leverage the strategic planning process as an opportunity to enhance organizational culture. Strategic planning is a perfect opportunity to train mid-level leaders to strengthen and support their leadership capabilities. It is the responsibility of mid-level leaders to translate the strategic plan into operational-level plans and actions that will result in execution throughout the organization (McPhail & McPhail, 2020). The success of any company is linked to its ability to adjust its purpose to a volatile environment or changing demand (Vrdoljak Raguž & Borovac Zekan, 2017).

New Leaders

The organization must constantly develop new leaders (Phillips & Phillips, 2020). Successful leaders recognize the importance of development opportunities for professionals with both the potential and the desire to take on a leadership role. Professional development of school leadership is crucial to successful implementation of changes in academic settings (Aas, 2017). A growing body of research identified how difficult it is to design professional leadership programs that make a difference in leaders' professional practice (Aas, 2017). The development of good leaders is fundamental to continual organizational success. Leaders must be able to identify potential, offer support, coach, mentor, and provide opportunities to lead. Leadership skills and behavior are shaped over time but are dramatically changed and improved with a variety of effective leadership development programs and opportunities (Phillips & Phillips, 2020). Developing new leaders requires clarification of goals, providing practical tools and

resources, and enabling a pathway that supports continual learning. As leadership identities develop it is likely individuals will become increasingly motivated to attempt new leadership activities, creating the potential for learning new leadership skills and further identity development (McCain & Matkin, 2019).

Leadership Development

Leadership development offers opportunities to increase employee engagement, increase the organization's ability to deal with gaps, and reduces turnover. Leadership learning programs emphasize generic requirements rather than individual capabilities or moral purpose (Aas, 2017). Collaboration can be a tool for professional development as teachers reflect on their abilities. The social interactions in collaborative development practices improve the quality of teaching and learning and the sense of community, and these relationships can have a profound and lasting effect on teachers' personal and professional lives (Tallman, 2019). A recurring theme in the literature confirms that when development is teacher-driven, it is likely to result in student-focused curricula. Teachers find this shared process of knowledge creation liberating, empowering, and supporting their professional development (Tallman, 2019).

Professional Development

Professional development training is often an underappreciated tool. There are many benefits to professional development, such as building confidence, credibility, energizing staff, improving efficiency, and increasing retention. Professional development initiatives build leadership capacity among faculty through mentorship and collaboration to improve the quality of teaching and student satisfaction (Carbone et al., 2017). Organizations that offer professional development training allow employees to prepare for positions of greater responsibility. Professional growth must be designed for a variety of opportunities. Individual and collective

reflections support leaders becoming learners with the capacity to make changes in their individual leadership that benefit their school (Aas, 2017). Investing in workers is beneficial to the whole organization. In many cases, the success and adoption of educational changes are shaped by teachers' capacity, professional self-esteem, and degree of autonomy to innovate and be creative in recommending innovative solutions to improve schools (Sales et al., 2017).

Midlevel leaders

Midlevel leaders are increasingly expected to provide leadership and support to a wide range of individuals in various settings. Still, many colleges have not yet identified effective ways to train mid-level leaders in the fundamentals of leading change (McPhail & McPhail, 2020). Organizations need a strategy that equips employees with the leadership skills needed to implement leadership development to shape the culture and strategy of the business. Emerging leaders influence other members, even when they have no formal authority (Luria et al., 2019). Leadership development also involves teaching individuals how to resolve conflict. These skills are valuable for leaders and team members. For example, transformational leaders encourage teams to move past individual interests and build a cooperative approach to conflict resolution; transactional leaders resolve conflict situations by removing ambiguity and uncertainty (Yang & Li, 2017).

Instructional Leadership

Teaching and learning need to improve to adapt to how pedagogy is changing. Individuals need to engage in more powerful forms of constructivist learning to succeed in a knowledge-based society. Instructional leadership attracts scholarly interest because of its potential to build internal capacity for sustainable school improvement (Bellibaş et al., 2020). In the education setting, instructional leadership is a part of strategic planning. Instructional

leadership includes defining the mission, managing instruction, developing curriculum, supervising teaching, monitoring student progress, and promoting instructional climate (Pietsch & Tulowitzki, 2017). Instructional leadership is centered on the quality of teaching in classrooms by focusing the attention of leaders on teachers' behaviors as they engage in activities directly affecting the growth of students (Pietsch & Tulowitzki, 2017). There is little known about how schools can incorporate pedagogical leadership into leadership development programs and how to connect leadership and learning (Aas, 2017). This situation is compounded by the limited ways to measure leadership learning outcomes quantitatively. It is difficult for schools to standardize a numerical return on their investment in their faculty, so the institution is limited on how value is calculated. Over the past few decades, many subsequent frameworks of instructional leadership have been included in the literature, and instructional leadership research has been criticized as lacking a consistent definition (Boyce & Bowers, 2018). The lack of an accepted definition raises questions for the body of instructional leadership research: what is the overall aim of instructional leadership research, and the theoretical and practical implications (Boyce & Bowers, 2018)?

Team Empowerment

No one individual is responsible for leading an organization to success; the collective efforts of many create achievement. Spreading empowerment among teaching professionals is increasingly gaining attention among scholars across educational contexts due to its positive associations with several teachers' work-related outcomes (Zahed-Babelan et al., 2019). The more senior a leader is in an organization, the more that individual must rely on the talents and skills of their team members. Leadership is successful when teams are involved in the decision-making process through participatory roles. Joint decision-making is one of the most popular

leadership behaviors adopted to facilitate empowerment and involves incorporating team members' opinions during the decision-making process (Guo & Wang, 2017). Leaders who do not utilize empowerment to their advantage become disassociated from their team, diminishing the likelihood of success. Team empowerment coincides with participative theory.

Empowerment is when leaders give their power to their followers, and the team is provided an opportunity to utilize their own experience and judgment to accomplish the mission. Empowerment is the perception of the meaningfulness and impact of work, competence, and levels of self-determination that a person uses to influence, motivate, and provide purpose for others. Research highlighted that when organizational leaders share control with their followers in the context of empowering teams, this empowerment could be a social reward (Fransen et al., 2020). As individuals report higher levels of psychological empowerment, teams are more likely to display shared leadership (Chen et al., 2019). Empowerment must be an inclusive and continuous process; the leader must communicate intent, encourage contribution, listen to the suggestions, and incorporate the good ideas into the business plan.

Conflict

Organizational leaders that empower their teams or have flatter organizational hierarchies utilize empowerment to perform their work, but these actions can result in forms of dysfunction. Open participative decision-making should be encouraged. The leader should create an atmosphere that allows everyone to be involved in healthy and sometimes difficult discussions; a challenging atmosphere leads to innovation and the increased morale of fellow teachers to work hard for attaining the department goals (Zahed-Babelan et al., 2019). Conflict means a difference of opinion or disagreement over interests, arguments, disputes, or fights. It can also mean a clash or contrast (Yang & Li, 2017). Conflict is both natural and can benefit the organization to

increase innovation. Conflict can stem from the dissimilarity of group members, personality traits, conflict management styles, and other demographic attributes (Adamovic et al., 2020). Empowerment can create tension by increasing conflict within the team dynamic; leaders must teach members how to trust, effectively understand and resolve conflict, and give employees independence to prevent conflict (Adamovic et al., 2020).

Cultural Conflict

Different cultures prioritize different values and behaviors; therefore, the globalization of management practices must remain applicable across cultures (Yang & Li, 2017). When teachers have opportunities to engage in professional discourse, collaboration, and distributed leadership, they become interconnected variables that work together to improve student achievement (Oldac & Kondakci, 2020). Creating a safe environment allows employees to feel comfortable sharing ideas, and the best ideas come from those experienced in their job. It is only when a culture supports employees' ideas that the team and organization benefit

Culture

A recurring theme in the current literature identifies organizational effectiveness as reliant on organizational culture. Organizational culture is a dynamic process created through interaction with others in the organization and a stabilizing force on social order with prescribed rules for behavior (Vito, 2020). The dynamic and complex processes of culture creation and management are the essence of leadership; it is imperative to understand that leadership and culture are two sides of the same coin (Zahed-Babelan et al., 2019). The success of modern organizations is contingent on employees' attitudes and their inclination to self-sacrifice for the organization; developing support to guide them toward organizational goals and objectives is a vital factor for positive organizational culture (Frolova & Mahmood, 2019). Leaders understand

and communicate the vision to create an environment that attracts people to the organization who share similar morals and values. Establishing trust is important because culture is based on respect and recognition of contributions to create a feeling of ownership, leading to increased dedication, better decision-making, and higher levels of effectiveness (Vito, 2020). Leaders recognize that a culture of leadership is developed by the behaviors modeled daily, and the acceptance of those behaviors becomes the way the company operates. Leadership styles strongly affect corporate culture because employees tend to act in ways that mirror their leaders (Vrdoljak Raguž & Borovac Zekan, 2017). Organizational culture influences the likelihood of the successful implementation and permanent adoption of change strategies. Leaders must create cultures that foster psychological empowerment by creating organizational structures that allow employees to express their opinions and make key decisions (Chen et al., 2019). Effective organizations are stable and integrated. In these organizations, employee behavior is valued, the leaders and followers agree in work process performance even when they have conflicting views. Lastly, the organizational activities are well-coordinated (Asadi & Stefanescu, 2019). Company culture matters and is significant to an organization's success. Developing, empowering, and training new leaders becomes challenging if a positive culture does not exist. It turns out that culture is vital to the success and well-being of an organization, the people, and the customers. Cultures' effect on individual behaviors has a far-reaching impact, and culture's influence on daily operations is undeniable. Leadership's job is to sustain an organization; that begins with creating a strong, lasting, positive culture of productive, empowered, and innovative individuals working together to achieve success.

The Problem

Higher education is facing multiple complex challenges. Traditionally, colleges and universities have relied on tried-and-true processes utilizing student and state-funded economic models for sustainment. These older models relied on a student paying tuition with personal funding or federal loans combined with state funding appropriations for public institutions. As the economy shifted globally, the amount in state appropriations declined. West Virginia has seen a 26% decrease in per-pupil state higher education funding from 2008 to 2018 (Castleman & Meyer, 2020). Adjustments in funding, global competition, and outside pressures from public-private partnerships have forced institutions to readjust their strategies. The problem of over-expansion in higher education and decreasing birth rates affects potential enrollment that challenges the supply system (Wu et al., 2019). Depopulation and declining student enrollment are not new issues for higher education research but are presenting significant challenges (Inaba, 2020). Knowledge production is considered the foundation of most countries' economic, social, and political competitiveness in the global economy (Kim et al., 2018). Schools must find a way to combat falling enrollment numbers, declining state funding, troublesome completion or dropout rates, and global competition if the organization wants to attract and retain students who will become tomorrow's leaders.

General Problem

The general problem that was addressed was the lack of distributed leadership in academic organizations creating disparate hierarchical groups resulting in the inability of academic institutions to successfully implement changes that can improve student outcomes. Higher education must seek new ways to improve student outcomes that align with expectations, industry needs, and competency-based skills. Higher education's purpose is to educate students

to live full and productive lives in society. Universities and colleges serve as the opportunity for young adults to create new knowledge of every kind. Higher education is comprised of independent and varied types of institutions, all competing with one another. The schools operate to sustain internal organizational self-interest even if they are part of a consortium or serve larger social objectives. Higher education is facing unsustainable costs by continually engaging in traditional teaching methods. Colleges and universities must find new and creative ways to increase education productivity. Higher education institutions are facing a changing population. Schools need to find innovative ways to educate a more diverse student population, such as those from disadvantaged backgrounds, limited financial means, and first-generation students. In the United States, the types of social capital to which lower-income, first-generation, and rural students have access affect how students navigate decisions about whether to enroll and remain enrolled in higher education (Castleman & Meyer, 2020). Additionally, changing demographics require schools to educate students classified as nontraditional at different stages of their lives and careers. Institutions must become more flexible in responding to the demand for new skills being raised by societal changes. Residential or commuter colleges drive up costs for institutions competing to attract students. These costs involve addressing increasing college dropout rates and the need for multifaceted interventions to support students' unique needs and values. Moreover, funds are needed to create more welcoming environments that improve outcomes for all students (Castleman & Meyer, 2020). Students have indicated there is a need to provide a comfortable, safe, and well-appointed environment for young adults to transition to adulthood.

Specific Problem

The specific problem addressed was the possible lack of distributed leadership in academic organizations creating disparate hierarchical groups within higher education

institutions in West Virginia. This lack of leadership resulted in the potential inability of academic institutions to successfully implement changes that improve student outcomes. There are considerable geographic gaps in college attainment for students from rural areas and rural areas like West Virginia, who are more likely to come from lower-income families. Even after accounting for income and academic preparation, they are less likely than their non-rural peers to enroll in college and earn a bachelor's degree (Castleman & Meyer, 2020).

Concepts

This next section describes the concepts including distributed leadership and the impact on organizational culture, improvement to student outcomes, issues, and pedagogical competition.

Distributed Leadership Improves Organizational Culture

The evidence shows distributed leadership as an important component and contributor to organizational outcomes. Achieving organizational excellence begins with implementing structures, organizations, and methodologies supported by tools and strategies to attain a desired corporate culture (Joseph & Bogue, 2018). The leadership in the organization influences the interactions and dynamics of the organizational culture. Leadership styles strongly affect culture because employees tend to act in ways that mimic their leader's behaviors (Vrdoljak & Borovac, 2017). Shared leadership relies on a context of trust and a culture of respect through building collegial, collaborative relationships to improve quality (Carbone et al., 2017). Distributed leadership is a democratic and participative leadership style. In an educational context, distributed leadership focuses on producing mechanisms where employees can demonstrate collective responsibility and share a learning culture (Bashir et al., 2017). The organization's culture finds opportunities to create, acquire, and transfer knowledge as well as modify behavior

to reflect new knowledge and apply that to the needs of the organization (Bashir et al., 2017). It is important to understand how autonomy and empowerment improve organizations' culture to also increase productivity and engagement. Teamwork is developed through an understanding of the role, value of team leadership, belief in the power of teamwork, increased interest and commitment, team building, and team unity (Turner et al., 2018). Organizational culture can be consciously designed, and leadership is a crucial factor in the adaptation process to encourage and promote change (Vrdoljak & Borovac, 2017).

Interaction to Improve Student Outcomes.

Leadership is fundamentally created using various levels of influence. Within school settings, there exist varied sources of power. The success of higher education depends on the paradigm shift to effectively adapt; the challenge is sustainability and flexibility over time (Raimondo, 2021). The evidence points towards a constructive relationship between distributed leadership, organizational progress, and student success. Distributed leadership means sharing leadership expertise at all levels in the education system to create more opportunities for change and capacity for improvement. Academic optimism has consistently been shown to positively impact student achievement regardless of socioeconomic background in various contexts (Oldac & Kondakci, 2020). The focus is shifted to interdependent interaction rather than focusing on individual and independent actions associated with formal roles. By improving the dynamics of interactions to promote honesty, the academic institution fosters dialog that facilitates improving student outcomes.

Issues with Distributed Leadership

Conflicting visions or goals can be a challenge to successfully implementing distributed leadership in schools. Distributed leadership can lead to management issues and competing

leadership styles (Tahir et al., 2016). Most of the literature focuses on simple polarities such as a manager versus a leader, different leadership styles, etc. Investigation into education questions the focus on the teacher as the leader, but little empirical work carried the implications of distributed leadership in higher education.

Pedagogical Competition

One crucial issue that remains to be addressed is the dynamic of pedagogical competition between faculty leaders in higher education. Distributed leadership introduces a layer of complexity regarding the competition. Faculty members are often compensated for individual efforts as part of the tenured track system. As a result, the institution is sending the message that promoting individual contributions rather than the collaborative efforts of a team-oriented goal are the most important objectives. This message from the administration contradicts the unified statement of distributed leadership that relies on collaboration. The opportunities to take on leadership roles may not be welcomed by faculty unless there is a clear understanding of the benefits for both the school and the faculty member (Tahir et al., 2016).

Willingness

Another issue affecting the utilization of distributed leadership is individuals' ability, expertise, experience, and willingness to hold leadership roles and subsequent responsibilities. For some faculty members, distributed leadership can be perceived as an increased workload that would dissuade faculty from wanting to take on more of a leadership role (Tahir et al., 2016). Additionally, higher education is a more bureaucratic organization; the industry is built upon a culture of hierarchical structures that creates a boundary associated with status-oriented roles (Tahir et al., 2016). The unspoken culture of leading relations differentiates peers, superiors, and subordinates and only serves to widen the boundaries between employees. Superiors are

generally respected as the decision-makers; these individuals may be less willing to share their power with others.

Conflict Management

Conflict is a naturally occurring element of organizations as people from different circumstances learn to work together. Conflict is an occurrence that disrupts the leader, the team, and the productivity or innovation of the organization. Relationship conflict is interpersonal clashes, and task conflict is a disagreement about job activities. The perceived incompatibilities or disagreements among team members have been proposed as an important factor affecting the creativity and innovation of teams (Hu et al., 2017). Leaders face a difficult decision when determining whether to step in or let a team resolve their conflict independently. Leadership at the team level builds dual networks to ensure that team members have the capabilities to quell dissent or disagreement and reach a consensus among themselves naturally (Guo et al., 2019). As a leader, it is beneficial to help the team learn conflict resolution skills that lay the groundwork for effective conflict management resolution. Organizations are increasingly dependent upon cross-functional teams to promote innovation due to limited resources, competition, and consumer pressures.

Theories

Participative theory suggests that in an organizational setting, the ideal leadership style allows employees to be involved directly with the organization's decision-making. Participative leadership is paralleled to democratic, distributed, or shared leadership. Participative management theory is a style of leadership that shares power and authority between a leader and the employees. Participative management theory is one of the most effective management and leadership practices that describes the relationship between participative leadership and

employee participation in decision-making in the organization (Mohammed Shaed, 2018). The leader facilitates and openly shares through conversation while taking suggestions from employees; that dialog produces the best possible solutions. The boundaries of the hierarchy are removed because the employees share values and goals. Participative leadership increases team creativity and encourages follower influence on decision-making and work unit operations. With this form of leadership, the leader consults with their followers and considers followers' opinions before making decisions (Li et al., 2018). The benefit to the organization is the improved quality of decision making, more comprehensive issues, and acceptance of decisions by employees due to direct involvement. Furthermore, organizations benefit from increased employee satisfaction and commitment to decision-making; and employee skills enhancement in decision-making (Mohammed Shaed, 2018).

Participative Theory in Leadership

Participative theory is one of the most effective leadership practices used to describe the relationship between participative leadership and employee participation concerning decision-making within an organization (Mohammed Shaed, 2018). Participative leaders share decision-making, provide transparency to the employees, maintain awareness of morale, are approachable, and promote available opportunities. Within a managerial approach, employee participative decision-making impacts the social, behavioral outcome among employees and the relational outcome for the organization (Tao et al., 2018). The use of participation helps influence the acceptance of ideas which can improve innovation. This theory encourages collaboration, freedom to express ideas, less competition, higher levels of morale, and retention rates. Additionally, policymakers must support a structure of empowerment by developing programs to emphasize awareness of these behaviors. Future research might benefit from exploring drivers

such as leadership styles and communication to expand the theoretical and prescriptive knowledge of communication and involvement (Tao et al., 2018).

Constructs

The following section describes the constructs found in this research as broad topics that are used to express ideas, people, events, or objects related to this study.

Leadership Style

Organizational leaders each have an individual style that influences the members and activities of the organization. Leadership styles matter far more than many companies acknowledge. White et al. (2019) described how leadership involves the ability to empower a diverse team and create an inclusive culture providing support, energy, and commitment that allows everyone to contribute their best. Whether they realize it or not, leaders shape the organizational culture's characteristics. Leadership style can loosely be defined as a combination of the leader's character, experiences, communication style, decision-making, emotional intelligence, and perspective. Leadership style includes a leader's cultural intelligence; the nature of the leader's cultural intelligence varies considerably between leadership styles (Solomon & Steyn, 2017). Northouse (2018) stated the basis of management was to create order and reliability, while the goal of leadership was to initiate change through vision, strategy, direction, and motivation. The varying styles determine what behaviors are effective in certain situations and these behaviors develop into the corporate culture. Leadership style is referenced throughout the literature and often begins as a starting point for many peer-reviewed articles. Bormann and Rowold (2018) described varying leadership styles as transformational, transactional, authentic, servant, charismatic, and laissez-faire. Servant leadership features leaders who care for their

subordinates and focus on their needs to reach their fullest potential and perform effectively (Langhof & Guldenberg, 2019).

Authoritarian leadership is the opposite of servant leadership, characterized by key decisions being made without followers being involved in the decision-making process (Langhof & Guldenberg, 2019). Studies on leadership style describe the varying types and then further segment into the effectiveness of specific areas impacted by the style. A fundamental change to an existing culture needs people to adopt new behaviors. Leaders must ensure new approaches align with the strategic plan and then work tirelessly to help the organization adopt the change. As a construct, leadership style is a far-reaching topic that focuses on how styles are effective in varying situations.

Organizational Culture

Another recurring construct found through much of the literature on leadership was organizational culture. A relationship exists between organizational culture and the commitment of workers. Organizational culture is important to defining a company's identity. Ethical behavior is based on the culture's norms and includes qualities such as honesty, strength, and kindness (Tropez et al., 2017). The common attributes cited throughout the research explain that organizational culture has social constructs that define how a company works together; this includes shared assumptions, norms, values, and beliefs necessary to improve the implementation of change to improve performance (Wijethilake et al., 2021). Culture can increase productivity, decrease turnover, increase engagement to extract the best possible work from each team member. Organizational culture influences the likelihood of the successful implementation and permanent adoption of change strategies necessary for sustainability in the global market. Leadership styles strongly affect corporate culture because employees tend to act

in ways that mirror their leaders (Vrdoljak Raguž & Borovac Zekan, 2017). According to Tan (2019), measuring organizational culture using the case study method provides solid construct validity. It allows the researcher to analyze rich data that cannot be fully specified before data collection begins. Culture plays a vital role in determining the success or failure of organizations' change towards sustainability (Wijethilake et al., 2021).

Trust

Trust is a basic component of great leadership. The individuals working together as part of a team must trust their leadership, themselves, and each other. Leaders understand the importance and time it takes to build trust with others. Great leaders cannot overlook the importance of positive relationships. A great leader requires transparency, honesty, feedback, extending trust to others, communication, being accountable, valuing relationships, helping others, and treating people well. Trust is a complex mix of emotion, expectation, and past experiences that vary from person to person. The leader knows what works for one may not work for another. Trust also involves taking risks and being vulnerable. Koeslag-Kreunen et al. (2018) concluded that leadership behaviors such as trust, empowerment, and goal setting are necessary to support the investment in team members.

Relationships

Leaders can be successful when they build relationships with their employees. To build rapport, leaders must create a culture that values each member and the unique contribution they provide. Relationship building is necessary to build trust and requires the leader to know each team member. McClellan and DiClementi (2017) described the need for leaders to alter their mood to fit the needs of the situation and should monitor their own and other members' emotions as a means of determining how their efforts impact those they lead. Emotions and moods are a

large part of the process and can directly influence relationships. Li et al. (2016) explained the four categories: meta-emotional abilities, dispositional traits, moods, and emotions. The researchers suggested that emotions differ from moods in specificity, strength, and duration and can be attributed to a triggered event. Leadership requires the skills necessary to identify and understand how emotions impact the team. Through this personal relationship, leaders can identify changes in mood or emotions. Leaders can then recognize potential issues before they become a more significant problem.

Related Studies

The European Journal of Education published an article discussing how principals can support teacher leadership (Bellibaş et al., 2020). The study related well to this research as the authors highlighted that teacher leadership had attracted scholarly attention. Teacher leadership attracts scholarly interest due to the potential to build internal capacity for sustainable school improvement (Bellibaş et al., 2020). The study was similar in that it focused on the effects of learning-centered leadership. Teacher leadership is defined as each organization member having the right, responsibility, and skills to lead (Bellibaş et al., 2020). Organizational leadership asserted that the learning-centered leadership model assumes that the learning of all the staff is key to school improvement. This specific element separates learning-centered leadership from other models (Bellibaş et al., 2020). Emphasis on learning to improve culture focuses on building a learning vision. Leaders communicate a vision to motivate teachers for learning and reflect the school leader's effort to create a positive culture of learning (Bellibaş et al., 2020). This study found results that were in line with what this research study attempted to determine. The research confirmed that leadership practices emphasizing teaching and learning were important for

enhancing school culture. Furthermore, teachers' participation in decisions and their enthusiasm for undertaking leadership practices must be supported (Bellibaş et al., 2020).

The Journal of Educational Administration published another article highlighting the translation of leadership standards into leadership practices (Riveros et al., 2016). This study aimed to determine how leadership standards are incorporated into the practices of school administrators using a qualitative exploratory case study approach (Riveros et al., 2016). The study also called for initiatives to transform educational practices. The findings and analysis identified school leadership practices as a theme contributing to leadership as an emerging identity and the intersection of leadership standards in schools (Riveros et al., 2016). School leaders are at a nexus of accountability and improvement with an increasingly explicit expectation that they will function as instructional leaders (Riveros et al., 2016). Leadership capacities permeate professional development, recruitment, and retention (Riveros et al., 2016). Goal setting, articulating strategic targets, aligning resources, developing curriculum, and promoting collaborative cultures (Riveros et al., 2016). The research highlighted areas where policymakers, practitioners, and researchers should focus their future efforts; this research aimed to provide a similar call to action for administrators in West Virginia.

The Human Relations Journal (New York) published an article examining shared and hierarchical leadership through authoring (Holm & Fairhurst, 2018). This article introduced the concepts of shared and hierarchical leadership. The authors explained that plural leadership literature ignores issues of power, competition, and conflict and how they play out over time (Holm & Fairhurst, 2018). Plural forms of leadership present a definitional challenge because scholars use terms like integrative, shared, distributed, relational, and post-heroic interchangeably (Holm & Fairhurst, 2018). There is little research focusing on the benefits of

utilizing both methods of shared leadership in a traditional hierarchy. The formal structuring of leadership roles and their spontaneous emergence interact dynamically over time, as hierarchical and more plural forms of leadership appear deeply intertwined (Holm & Fairhurst, 2018). The concept of leadership disintegrates as it shifts to more plural forms that may look like teamwork or collaboration (Holm & Fairhurst, 2018). The empirical relationship between shared and hierarchical leadership is often a case of contrast, not one of codependency. Scholars of shared leadership imply, but never fully flesh out, the emergent character of shared leadership (Holm & Fairhurst, 2018).

Anticipated and Discovered Themes

The following are the anticipated themes for the research. It is important to identify themes in qualitative research as they are drawn from multiple scholarly resources. Identifying themes is one of the most fundamental tasks in qualitative research. Themes can come from different sources, from data as a logically learned approach to the researcher's prior theoretical understanding of the phenomenon being studied. The researcher identified themes in writing by looking for patterns in the data.

Instructional Practices

An anticipated theme in the research pertaining to leadership for higher education was instructional practices. There is an abundance of literature on "good teaching" in higher education, including many widely used texts and resources offering research-informed advice for teaching in higher education (Smith & Baik, 2019; 2021). Higher education instructional practices focus on the ways that students achieve learning outcomes. Further, research on teaching practices is conducted within disciplines and is conducted on samples of convenience within those disciplines, which threatens the external validity of the findings of those studies

(Smith & Baik, 2019; 2021). Those student-facing outcomes are the primary objective for higher education institutions and their faculty members. Leadership needs change to deconstruct knowledge frameworks that perpetuate inequity and to reconstruct with a focus on democracy, equity, and justice. These changes can address the inequitable distribution of power and emphasize interdependence, interconnectedness, and global awareness (Riveros et al., 2016). High impact teaching practices require innovative approaches for the most impactful teaching and curriculum strategies. Given the current challenges facing higher education with the growth in a more diverse cohort, there is a need to focus on teaching practices that are most likely to lead to effective student learning outcomes (Smith & Baik, 2019; 2021).

Behavior

Some leadership behaviors benefit performance via positive contributions to the leader-follower social exchange, and other leadership behaviors may simultaneously exhibit adverse effects on performance via reduced empowerment (Young et al., 2021). Transactional leadership behaviors were the first to be studied and are recognized as the foundation of effective leadership. Scholarly attention has shifted from transactional leadership without fully considering the costs and benefits of transactional leaders' behaviors (Young et al., 2021). Abilities describe behaviors that distinguish effective performers from ineffective ones by examining behaviors that include motives, beliefs, and values. These behaviors represent the tasks and activities used to accomplish a specific job (Anzengruber et al., 2017). Change behaviors target improving innovativeness and adapting to internal and external changes in the environment (Anzengruber et al., 2017).

Decision Making

Leaders must help groups navigate working within a dynamic team and provide an environment that promotes ethical decision-making. Asymmetrical relationships can be observed in society; high-social dominant employees sustain many of these hierarchies endorsing harsh power tactics to remove opposition (Aiello et al., 2018). The art of decision-making requires a person to be convincing. A good argument has a well-formed structure, relevant premise to the truth, acceptable to a reasonable person, sufficient grounds for the truth of the conclusion, and effective rebuttal to criticisms (Damer, 2013). Leadership power and influence build upon one's ability to be truthful, honest, and transparent and to use reasoning to construct a good argument. Fallacies exist when an argument is invalidated by a flaw or relevant challenge to the argument. The moment fallacies are exposed is when the ethical character of a leader is defined. The leader must be subtle in identifying fallacies in other arguments. They must be able to recognize the fallacy in their own arguments. More importantly, they must be willing to understand the argument from alternative perspectives.

Research suggested that traditional hierarchical leadership models produce conflicts in decision-making processes. As a result, changes to the traditional leadership styles were needed to overcome this conflict. This research study aimed to identify characteristics of distributed leadership that positively influence organizational decision-making processes. The researcher further explored an expected theme of finding how factors like individual personality traits, leadership styles or types, culture, and team member relations influence organizational culture to contribute to decision-making. Participative decision-making (PDM) has become popular in education as educational institutions move toward a more subordinate-centered management style. Students and educators benefit from this shared decision-making process (Torlak et al., 2021). Distributed leadership challenges the existing bureaucratic structures of educational

institutions. It allows educators to be involved in planning, which contributes to higher commitment, morale, and trust needed to improve innovation, job satisfaction, and corporate culture (Torlak et al., 2021). Leaders make decisions that directly affect others; as a result, that process is stressful for any leadership position. The imprecise nature of decision-making leads to further frustrations as leaders try to fully comprehend the intricacies of an issue that creates greater hesitation and anxiety (Davis, 2018).

Leader Member Exchange (LMX)

Leadership influences commitment, motivation, and working conditions to directly affect capacity beliefs, teaching practices, and student learning and achievement (Pietsch & Tulowitzki, 2017). The study discussed how transactional leadership exchanges work as leaders and followers negotiate the cost and benefits based on their self-interests. The research described how followers are influenced and how transactional leadership is related to that performance outcome (Young et al., 2020). The research supported empowerment and follower performance to create hypotheses focused on reward and task performance contingency. Transactional leadership theory and leader-member exchange theory are compared in a lot of research. Leaders are expected to reinforce and correct undesirable follower behaviors (Young et al., 2020). Leader affective displays have been identified as an influence on leadership effectiveness. They positively affect and link to positive evaluations of leadership compared to the absence of negative affective displays (Knippenberg & Edelman, 2018).

Leadership as an Emergent Identity

Emergent leadership is when management allows leaders to rise naturally from within an organization. This process is different compared to an organization traditionally selecting managers. Organizations focus on learning the traits of emergent leaders and determine how they

align with business objectives. Education instructors need to understand how to prepare future leaders with the necessary skills to succeed (McCain & Matkin, 2019). Identities are created through social action, including practice and standards that contribute to the constitution of the school's identity (Riveros et al., 2016). When identifying leadership potential, this type of selection has grown popular in companies where creative and critical thinking are valued. Emergent leaders inspire others, build rapport, are respected, and followed by their peers regardless of their title or position. Understanding the process of creating a leadership identity is central to designing leadership programs and teaching leadership (McCain & Matkin, 2019).

Manager Effectiveness

Another anticipated theme for the research study describes the differences between managers and leadership. Managerial effectiveness means that leaders can organize employees to accomplish goals. The organization's leadership must select leaders whose skills in motivating and dealing with people are a significant part of their ability to manage subordinates. Managers are viewed as task-oriented administrators, not necessarily leaders, but that viewpoint depends on the definition of leadership. Different roles along the hierarchy have different requirements and demands. To be an effective manager or leader, one must adjust their leadership style according to the requirements demanded by the role (Anzengruber et al., 2017). A discovered theme expected to be found in the research describes how managers, regardless of their leadership status, play pivotal roles in influencing the success or failure of an organization. Managers can also be leaders and have significant power and influence in driving organizational strategies that improve efficiency and effectiveness, exploit market opportunities, and identify and neutralize potential threats (Anzengruber et al., 2017). It is tempting to say being a manager does not make a person a leader, but the title itself implies a form of power that can be leveraged as an

influence. The lowest leadership level is positional; that position is based on title and the rights granted specifically by that title only (Khan & Ramzan, 2019). Managers are no different from leaders when comparing that each one has a unique style. Leaders just tend to be more charismatic, but both influence followers. There are specific characteristics of managerial effectiveness that apply across industries. The organization can benefit from the insight that comes from recognizing the distinctive behaviors that best align with the individual organization's mission, culture, needs, and goals.

Discovered Themes

The following section includes themes that were discovered as part of the research study. Themes are defined as patterns, categories, similarities, and differences in the data that the researcher analyzed. The researcher was able to identify six predominant themes after conducting thematic analysis. The themes identified by the researcher in the data aligned with the academic literature, research questions, and conceptual framework for this study. The themes identified below are the results of this qualitative case study depicting the perceptions of distributed leadership of the 20 participants involved in this study.

1. Training and professional development are essential for creating leaders throughout the organizational hierarchy.
2. Challenges facing the higher education industry are related to reduced budgets, declining enrollment populations, and the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.
3. Leadership behaviors directly contribute to successful change adoption, collaboration, student experience, and culture.
4. Leaders must balance competing and often conflicting demands that can alter the perceptions of the organizational culture and student experience.

5. The absence of distributed leadership negatively effects leadership practices related to empowerment, formal organization, culture, and information sharing.
6. The hierarchical organization and the company culture dictate the speed at which changes are accepted and adopted into the organization.

Summary of the Literature Review

This professional and academic literature review provided the structure to support the research study. The researcher broke down the leadership practices into strategic planning, building new leaders, and team empowerment. The subsections focused on the ability to train, support, and achieve strategic goals by creating new leaders and team empowerment. The organization's success depends on empowering the team to make decisions and simultaneously exposing mid-career professionals to leadership activities to secure the organization's leadership future. The following section outlined the problem by dissecting the general problem to be addressed as the lack of distributed leadership in academic organizations creating disparate hierarchical groups. This lack of leadership resulted in the inability of academic institutions to successfully implement changes that improve student outcomes. The concepts section focused on distributed leadership collaboration, improving organizational culture, and interactions that enhance student outcomes. Distributed leadership shares responsibility, accountability, and authority across the team by empowering those with the knowledge, skills, and expertise to participate in critical decisions. The theories section focused specifically on participative theory to examine how this theory benefits decision-making, creativity, and innovation. The constructs were broken down into leadership styles, focusing on servant and authoritarian leadership styles, the organizational culture affecting behavior, and the adoption of strategy, trust, and relationships. The related studies section identified three scholarly and peer-reviewed articles

that align with the goals of this research study. The related studies component encouraged a culture that values team members and for leaders to develop future leaders to improve the organization's outcomes. The studies selected were qualitative analyses of leadership practices in education. The anticipated themes examined instructional practices and explored behavior, decision making, and leader-member exchange. The discovered themes explored leadership as an emergent identity and manager effectiveness.

Summary of Section 1 and Transition

This section provided the introduction to the examination of distributed leadership in higher education. The study's background defined the purpose of this research to determine how higher education institutions in West Virginia can leverage distributed leadership to influence culture to improve student outcomes. The problem and purpose statements provided the purpose of this flexible qualitative single case study to expand the understanding behind West Virginia's higher education institutions' inability to successfully implement changes and its effect on student outcomes. This qualitative study sought to explain elements of distributed leadership's successes and failures, student-facing change initiatives, and how the combination of distributed leadership impacts changes related to students. The research was aimed at helping institutions improve leadership practices that aid in retention strategies. The research sought to determine the driving factors related to distributed leadership and determine if there was a specific influence on the ability to implement changes in the academic environment successfully. This section then offered a brief overview of the four main research paradigms and the selection of constructivism to the researcher's worldview. Next, a design discussion explained the differences between fixed, flexible, and mixed methods before concluding that a flexible design was most appropriate for this research. A high-level overview of narrative, phenomenology, grounded theory,

ethnography, and case study research methods were covered before explaining why the case study was the most appropriate. Next, a discussion of triangulation explained the impact on validity and the methods used for triangulation. The research framework covered concepts, theories, actors, and constructs to offer an interaction between the flow of information. A review of the professional and academic literature aimed to support the foundational concepts for the study. Lastly, supporting materials were provided to the reader, including a list of uncommon terms, assumptions, limitations, delimitations, reduction of gaps in the literature, implications for biblical integration, and the benefit and relationship to leadership practices.

Transition

The second section included the introductory paragraph and purpose statement. The section described the role of the researcher, how the researcher took action, and personal biases were explored. An overview of the appropriateness of the research methodology, including flexible design, single case study, and triangulation was reviewed. Next, a description of the participants, population, and sampling were discussed. The discussion on population provided an overview of the participants eligible to participate and how they were selected. A discussion on sampling details was discussed and why they were used. The section then provided a data collection plan, interview guides, surveys, archival data, and data organization. The data collection plan documented what data the researcher planned to collect and how the collection took place. The researcher described why this was appropriate for this research project. An explanation of data organization described how the research gathered was organized and the process necessary to manage it. Then data analysis included qualitative analysis, analysis for triangulation, followed by a section outlining the study's reliability, validity, and bracketing. Data analysis provided a detailed discussion on the gathering and organizing of the themes and

process of coding. A detailed discussion of how triangulation was conducted for this research project ensued. The reliability and validity section described how reliability and validity were implemented into the study. Bracketing provided the researcher's techniques to address bias in anticipated themes to prevent it from adversely impacting the study.

Section 2: The Project

A review of the qualitative methodology examined how the possible lack of distributed leadership in academic organizations creates disparate hierarchical groups within higher education institutions in West Virginia. This lack of leadership results in academic institutions' potential inability to successfully implement changes that improve student outcomes. This study sought to understand and explain the role of leadership in higher education and, specifically, the outcomes impacting students. Leaders of universities are under fire from scandals, funding cuts, from dissatisfied students, few faculty members want to take on leadership positions they characterize as "the dark side" of administration (Pearce et al., 2018). Researchers of higher education have identified concerns with top-down leadership models and agree distributed leadership approaches may provide more successful engagement with institutional change agendas (Beckmann, 2017).

The future of leadership in higher education is guaranteed to be a challenging experience. The individuals who lead universities face tasks for which they may be underprepared or unaware; the push for results in a changing environment is greater than ever before. However, a problem exists in the current structures supporting higher education institutions. We must first ask who are the leaders in higher education? The truth is that every faculty member is a leader because scholars are knowledge workers, and knowledge workers are leaders; they provide thought leadership (Pearce et al., 2018). Administrators are also leaders because they need to deliver results, faculty need to teach, and with so many leaders, it is no wonder that the situation is confusing regarding leadership and strategic goals in the higher education industry (Pearce et al., 2018). This research aimed to explore whether shared or distributed leadership answers the problem. The fundamental goal of higher education is to create and disseminate knowledge

through teaching and research, while the business ensures educational and financial sustainability in the process (Pearce et al., 2018). The cultural shift to that of distributed leadership allows the organization to align, strengthen, and leverage the common goals of both administrators and faculty to improve the student experience.

The evaluation research for this qualitative study involved a narrative approach to analyze the details of individual experiences and peer-reviewed scholarly research material to identify themes within the context of the participants and case studies. The following sections define the purpose statement, the researcher's role, the actions to conduct the study, bracketing, and a summary. The next section then described the appropriateness of flexible design and single case study as well as triangulation to improve data reliability and validity.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this flexible qualitative single case study was to expand the understanding behind West Virginia's higher education institutions inability to successfully implement changes and the effect it has on student outcomes. The research sought to determine the driving factors related to distributed leadership and see if there is a specific influence on the ability to successfully implement changes in the academic environment. The qualitative nature of the study sought to understand and explain elements of distributed leadership success or failure, student facing change initiatives, and how the combination of distributed leadership impacts changes that improve student outcomes. The evaluation research for this qualitative study involved a narrative approach to analyze the details of individual experiences and peer reviewed scholarly research material to identify themes within the context of the participants and case studies. Qualitative research increases thoughts about experiences and aids in developing a more fully informed narrative of participant identities (Mobley et al., 2019). The larger problem of improving student

outcomes is explored through an in-depth study of distributed leadership and its effect on the successful implementation of changes to higher education in West Virginia.

Role of the Researcher

The role of the researcher was to be the instrument of data collection for the study. The researcher aimed to develop competence, collect, analyze data, and present the research findings in an unbiased study. As the researcher, it is important to explain the context of the study without bias, conduct appropriate participant interviews, select a suitable design method, perform the necessary literary research, make fitting observations, handle the data properly, and analyze the data per the design methodology. The final role was to develop a comprehensive study that presents the findings and adds to the industry's body of knowledge.

The author of this paper served as the only researcher for this study. The researcher was responsible for all functions of the research investigation, data collection, analysis, and findings. Researchers and the various roles and the various roles they play in a study are an essential part of the social constructs being researched. As a tool or instrument, the researcher must describe the relevant aspects of oneself to the reader. The role of the researcher in this setting was to understand and further explore that view of reality without introducing any personal bias during the entire process. The only way to accomplish this was to explore any personal assumptions, expectations, or experiences the researcher has on the topic being reviewed. Constructivism aims to collect knowledge based on subjective meanings, social phenomena, and actions associated with those persons being studied within a defined social context (Bogna et al., 2020). Constructivism is a reality created through human interaction. The byproduct of that human interaction is knowledge of that construction. Researchers are never separate from their own

beliefs when conducting a study. Personal beliefs will inevitably inform how the researcher collects, interprets, and analyzes the data (Ryan, 2018).

The researcher's goal of understanding is not to discover a universal truth or human experience regarding context and value, but to utilize the flow of knowledge and truth to understand individuals' interpretations and personal constructs (Kankam, 2019). If one believes in multiple socially constructed realities, then the researcher hopes to comprehend the world from the view of the individual based on their subjective understanding and experiences. Additionally, constructivism explores how people think, examines what people do, and how they approach problems such as distributed leadership from a social formation. Using this approach to study qualitative research in organizations allows the researcher to study issues such as ethics, leadership, and cultural factors impacting leadership from a flexible approach.

A Christian viewpoint defines how individuals experience situations and what they believe the subjective reality to be based on. In this example, what the researcher and participant believe about God influences and works in their individual lives. The constructivism paradigm describes how each person interprets God's presence in their lives differently. Those personal experiences influence how we attempt to understand His will and purpose for us as individuals. The view is that uncommitted and indifferent impartiality is impractical, and realism or practicality of framework and background are imperative (Kankam, 2019). The researcher recognized varying approaches to one's views of the world and religious beliefs, and the different approaches directly affect how one approaches research.

Qualitative researchers create the necessary opportunity to explore the existing disparity between what is communicated formally on behalf and within an organization with the more informal happenings in the undercurrent of the company culture. Specifically, what matters are

not being openly discussed. The researcher is the facilitator who allows for the distinct identification of different or nontraditional perspectives from the formalized approach. Fallacies of qualitative researchers characterize them as subjective due to the flexible nature of the study and the types of questioning used in qualitative research. The benefit of this approach for a qualitative researcher is the ability to document, describe, discuss, and draw out information that isn't easily accessible to those individuals outside of the organization. This study's outcome provides value because the research helps identify themes in the responses that contribute to academics and industry being studied.

Actions to Conduct the Study

The researcher utilized the following six research methodology steps to guide the researcher in her collection and analysis of the data. Abutabenjeh and Jaradat (2018) described six steps:

1. Decide when and how often to collect data.
2. Develop measures for each variable.
3. Identify a sample population.
4. Choose a strategy for contacting subjects.
5. Plan the data analysis.
6. Present the findings.

The researcher provided an email request letter to the Human Resources department, which forwarded the email to the Institutional Research Board (IRB) for approval. The researcher obtained IRB approval before distributing the email correspondence requesting volunteer participation from individuals in the organization. The potential participants responded by email directly to the researcher, confirming their willingness to participate. Once the individual

expressed interest in participating in the study, the researcher and participant arranged a suitable virtual interview time. The meeting was then scheduled, and the participant was provided a consent form agreeing to be recorded and granting permission to use their commentary. The interviews were conducted virtually using the Microsoft videoconferencing platform, Teams. Participants of the study were asked to join the Teams meeting with their microphone enabled and their camera enabled as an option. Participants were instructed to use their real names during the interview. The researcher changed the names to codes (P1, P2, P3, etc.) in the study. This option afforded the participants some level of anonymity; not visually seeing them during the interviews and the ability to use a participant coding model helped protect the participants' identity. The researcher enabled her camera to be visible to participants via Teams. The researcher simultaneously recorded the interviews through Teams existing tools and utilized their transcription services. The researcher maintained copies of the recording on her home computer and stored secondary copies of the transcript and video recording on the Microsoft OneDrive cloud provided by Liberty University.

Bracketing to Avoid Personal Bias

Bracketing is used in qualitative research to alleviate the harmful effects of preconceptions that can cause defects that weaken the research process. Bias is essentially a way of introducing a source of error into the research. The researcher's ideas about the study, knowledge of the topics, knowledge obtained from the literature review, personal expectations for the study, and human experiences can distort the study's outcomes. The detrimental effect of personal bias suggests that bracketing should occur at the earliest stages of the research process (Gregory, 2019). The researcher uses bracketing to refrain from introducing types of personal judgment or commonly accepted ways of viewing the social standards in the world. Bracketing

effectively allows the researcher a means to separate their personal experiences from influencing the study. Bracketing involves being open-minded and being willing and accepting of other perspectives. Setting aside prior understanding of the social realities in question is called bracketing and involves encapsulating one's preconceptions, theoretical commitments, and life experiences as they unfold within the phenomenological tradition (Gregory, 2019). Bracketing is challenging when a researcher is heavily invested in a particular theoretical framework that has shaped their education or research (Gregory, 2019). Emotional detachment allows the researcher to set boundaries, making it easier to focus on a research question than on the topic's underlying relationship.

As the researcher, I recognized some preconceived notions may exist, it was important to review and explore the boundaries of the topic and my personal experiences. After bracketing, the researcher is left with phenomena as experienced by grasping reflections as they are in themselves; any persons, communities, social formations, every kind of cultural work become topics for investigation (Soule & Freeman, 2019). Bracketing involves people distancing themselves from the phenomenon of interest by holding the phenomenon outside of one's understanding of the topic (Soule & Freeman, 2019).

The researcher personally attended different institutions during their educational career, including working in higher education. The researcher currently works in a department that utilizes a distributed leadership approach. The researcher attempted to exclude relevant experiences or comparisons from the research questions or analyses. The researcher conducted research with another school in West Virginia. The selection of schools outside of the researcher's personal interactions attempted to avoid any personal assumptions, expectations, or experiences from the researcher's current environment. Additionally, the researcher anticipated

that if the study was conducted using participants familiar with the researcher, answers to research questions might not reflect a complete or forthcoming account of the experiences. Participants may elect not to disclose some information due to personal connections or repercussions from the researcher's employment position. Selecting other educational institutions in West Virginia for the study allowed the researcher to remain passionately involved from a holistic perspective, but a degree of researcher detachment exists because the researcher has not personally interacted with those schools. In this case, detachment from the school allowed the researcher to function in a setting that would otherwise be flawed; these biased disclosures were reflected upon before engaging in the research process. It was challenging for the researcher to escape the constructivist way the researcher interprets social reality. In qualitative research methods, the researcher functions as the analysis instrument. The researcher utilized their own strategies for demonstrating personal bias and bracketing control while conducting this study. One bracketing method the researcher used was writing memos throughout the data collection and analysis process. This action of writing memos serves as a form of theoretical notes. The theoretical notes explained my personal cognitive development during the interview and research processes. The note-taking uncovered themes that increased the researcher's clarity and engagement with participants' experiences. Organizational notes explain the process aspects of research and any observational comments. The idea of taking notes allowed the researcher to further explore important insights that are needed to keep an open mind to fully examine the research for alternative perspectives. These insights include acknowledging preconceptions. The process of writing down one's assumptions frees the researcher to engage more fully with the raw data.

Summary

This section provided an overview of the research and why this topic was being studied. A review of the purpose statement explained specifically what this research study aimed to explore and the benefits of this study's outcomes. Next, the role of the researcher was explored, along with the beliefs held by the researcher. The section regarding the role of the researcher explained the personal experiences, thoughts, and emotions of participants in this study. The steps or actions to conduct the study were further detailed to guide how the research study was developed from start to finish. This section provided the transition into explaining bracketing and personal bias in this study. The area on bracketing explained how the introduction of personal bias could be detrimental to the validity and support of the study. The section further provided steps to remediate or remove personal bias by utilizing a note-taking approach for the researcher to explore and reflect upon participant engagements. The following section further describes the research methodology using a flexible, single case study design.

Research Methodology

This study was conducted with a flexible design using a qualitative method. Specifically, the researcher utilized a single case study design. The general meaning of research design, including decisions about when and how to collect data, refers to the study's methodology (Abutabenjeh & Jaradat, 2018). The study of leadership within higher education is best studied by exploring the personal experiences of research participants. The rationale and appropriateness for selecting the qualitative method and single case study design are discussed in the following section below. The application of the methodology as it pertains to the research questions and engaging in the triangulation method serve to further support the research study's methodology.

Flexible Design

Quantitative, qualitative, and mixed method approaches to research each have their advantages and disadvantages. It is important to determine which approach best aligns with the study being conducted as a researcher. The researcher selected a qualitative approach for this research project because the advantages fit best with this research study type. The study of leadership is best explored qualitatively because the study aims to examine participants' personal experiences through detailed interviews and other means of data collection. The research design for this study supports a flexible qualitative approach. Robson and McCartan (2016) described the researcher as having freedom in developing the qualitative questions in a descriptive, evaluative, narrative, casual, and effectual context. Qualitative data can be examined for content relevant to the key distributed leadership attributes in the literature, including culture, trust, and relationship collaboration (Beckmann, 2017). The qualitative approach analyzes the data to correlate previous scholarly research material and case studies to the effects of the research questions. This study was focused on determining what makes distributed leadership successful in improving student outcomes in higher education. This method allowed the researcher to discover themes in the research documentation to identify the benefits development opportunities available to the individual, the team, and the organization. The purpose of this study was not to find correlations, as with quantitative research, but to further explore and comprehend personal experiences that could aid the researcher in identifying trends, similarities, consistencies, and inconsistencies in the experiences of individuals. This personal experience data aimed to provide fullness to the topic of leadership by enhancing insight and expanding current research in the field.

The research selects a flexible research design because the study can be conducted on topics of interest that are not quantitatively measurable, such as leadership styles and organizational culture. Flexible designs allow the researcher some freedom when collecting the data from participants. A qualitative study examines historical events to generalize results that can be correlated to new events. A qualitative study aims to understand or explore personal experiences and use data to find similarities that expand upon current theory and scholarly academic research. The researcher can ask questions that are open to participants to answer as thoroughly as they see fit. The flexibility of this approach allows the evolution of the research process to take place. This process can be done while the research is being conducted simultaneously. The qualitative method, particularly with a single case, can better illustrate the beginnings of theory development (Reddy, 2020; 2021). This qualitative research study sought to understand how higher education distributed leadership practices in West Virginia can successfully implement changes that have positive outcomes for students. The researcher utilized interviews and scholarly evidence to further explore the experience of the research participants regarding the role of leadership. This project's scope was to study the importance of leadership in higher education and how distributed leadership can improve organizational efficiencies that support positive student outcomes.

Discussion of Single Case Study

A single case study focuses on a specific set of participants to create a generalized overview to help the researcher understand this contextual environment. The single case is best used to explore the meaning of a specific phenomenon, whether at the individual, organizational or societal level. It can also be used to identify actors, steps, conditions, and variables to develop a tentative explanation (Reddy, 2020;2021). A single qualitative case study is a research

methodology that aids in exploring a phenomenon within some context through various data sources. It undertakes the exploration through various lenses to reveal multiple facets of the phenomenon (Rashid et al., 2019). The case study is helpful in testing theories and describing topics that are internal to academic institutions. Descriptive approaches to leadership studies, such as conceptual analysis, case studies, survey research, and lab experiments, cannot on their own state what leaders must do to be successful (Flanigan, 2017). A single case study approach is the conclusion developed by the research aimed at synthesizing or providing a confirmable way to demonstrate the outcomes the researcher is recommending. When researchers have some knowledge about a phenomenon, they use a single case to describe the phenomenon's essence (Reddy, 2020; 2021).

Applied to Research Questions

The first research question looked at a broad view of why leaders fail to apply distributed leadership. This question required the view of flexibility through an inherited fluid social reality of hierarchical leadership models. Administrative leaders are strongly encouraged to assume bold visions, incentivized to produce, and harshly criticized or dismissed if they fail to deliver results (Pearce et al., 2018). The unending demand placed on administrators forces leaders to engage in heavy-handed, top-down leadership in a poor attempt to drive results. Pearce et al. (2018) discussed why administrators continue to rely on command and control. The destructive leadership pattern fails to yield results; as a result, this study was designed to respond to these research questions.

The researcher identifies the themes and conducts the analysis allowing for flexibility in methodology selection. Themes can easily emerge from reviewing the research data, but the

researcher must choose the narrative descriptions that make the most sense for the proposed questions.

There is a need for stronger educational outcomes for today's students. The second question explored how student outcome initiatives are different from administrative-focused projects. Student success initiatives include a wide range of topics focused on enrollment, improved retention, student experience, and timely graduation. This question aimed to explore how enhancing student experience opportunities differs from administrative types required to keep the business sustainable. Students and the affiliated processes should be at the heart of any efforts designed to improve the student experience, thereby increasing enrollment, retention, and graduation rates. Kadhila and Iipumbu (2019) argued that a strong quality culture tends to be more effective in enhancing the quality of the student learning experience and academic success in higher education. The biggest challenge is that schools focus on improving institutional or administrative management processes rather than on changing institutional culture to improve teaching and learning practices to enhance the quality of the student learning experience (Kadhila & Iipumbu, 2019).

Question three focused more specifically on the fundamental pieces of distributed leadership present in organizations that successfully implement change to improve student outcomes. Change is one dimension of outcomes that derives from multiple levels and functions as a mix of top-down, bottom-up, and middle-out contributions (Beckmann, 2017). Barrett et al. (2019) explained that leadership development is a significant investment and is foundational for a culture change process to be successful. The narrative approach seeks to build support for a generalized persona of the organizational culture that adopts changes to support student outcomes. An institutional culture that is resistant to change, needs improvements, and possesses

poor project selections can negatively affect the implementation efforts of change projects (Cano et al., 2020). Leadership effectiveness in a culture change process must focus on relationship-based distributed leadership as a critical platform for the culture change process (Barrett et al., 2019). Distributed leadership can expand the company's problem-solving capacity by developing an organization of trust. The ability to create a culture of shared leadership takes time; it involves changing relationships, shifting foundations of interactions, and developing systems that sustain changes. Through distributed leadership practices, the organization can promote a culture that seeks to understand, model open-minded communication, embrace change, and focus on building an environment that supports student outcomes necessary for the organization to remain sustainable in the future.

Discussion of Methods for Triangulation

The role of the researcher is to help the reader validate how true or credible the research is. Triangulation aims to improve the reliability, trueness, certainty, and legitimacy of the findings presented in the research. Certainty ensures the research is backed by quality evidence that prevents the reader from doubting the results' quality. Triangulation attempts to corroborate the results, complementarity seeks to explain the results, development attempts to inform the other method, initiation seeks to see new perspectives, and expansion extends the breadth of inquiry (Schoonenboom & Johnson, 2017).

This study utilized data triangulation as it is one of the most popular techniques for qualitative research studies. Data triangulation techniques evaluate the qualitative research case study by utilizing different data sources to build consensus. The data sources were comprised of interviews and surveys; they were sent to several potential participants, some decided not to respond. Interviews are effective when applied to qualitative research because it helps the

research describe, understand, and explore participant thoughts, individual behaviors, and experiences related to the phenomenon being studied. Interview questions are suited for qualitative research because open-ended questions allow the conversation to provide in-depth data that can be analyzed through patterns. Qualitative interviewing is a data-collection tool applicable to a broad range of methodological approaches, and it can be applied to several research questions (McGrath et al., 2019). Qualitative research interviews are preferred when the researcher attempts to understand the participants' subjective perspective of a phenomenon rather than creating generalizable understandings (McGrath et al., 2019). Open-ended interviews can also provide an alternative approach that allows participants to offer a unique undefined answer compared to surveys that use a list of predetermined responses. This approach allowed participants some flexibility and freedom to express more openly about a topic. This method also provides the researcher with more exploratory data that may aid in uncovering additional opportunities to discover themes, patterns, or areas of research. Triangulation obtained in patterns confirms the quantitative data, lending confidence that the interview process does not fabricate outcomes (Gibson, 2017). Data triangulation categorizes and groups different forms of data collection together. For participant interviews, open-ended questions were presented to each participant for responses. Triangulating the research attempted to look for outcomes and patterns that all participants agreed upon. The evidence suggested that if all the participants agreed, it was more likely to be an accurate outcome indicator.

Summary of Research Methodology

This section explained the appropriateness of selecting the qualitative method and single case study design. The section explored how the application of the methodology as it pertains to the research questions, along with the appropriateness of the triangulation method serve to

further support the research study. The section on triangulation provided a high-level discussion regarding selecting interview and open-ended survey options for data collection. The section then correlated the data collection type and how it applies to triangulation. The researcher dissected each research question to explore why the question was relevant and how the responses can be developed into valuable findings to contribute to the body of knowledge in the industry. This use of data triangulation was selected due to its popular application in qualitative research studies for building consensus. As a researcher, it is the job of the study to establish credibility in the results.

This qualitative study explored how the possible lack of distributed leadership in academic organizations creates disparate hierarchical groups within higher education institutions in West Virginia. This lack of leadership results in the potential inability of academic institutions to successfully implement changes that improve student outcomes. The researcher utilized a constructivism paradigm, flexible qualitative methodology, and case study design for exploring the details of individual and organizational experiences. These tools helped the researcher identify themes to understand what makes organizations with distributed leadership successful in implementing changes that positively improve student outcomes.

Participants

A research study requires the researcher to select participants in the study. The advantage of a qualitative research project is that it is directly associated with the research participants. As a result, an important step in the research process is careful deliberation to determine who should participate. A central challenge facing researchers involves properly selecting participants, as researchers must select participants impartially (MacKay et al., 2020). As the data collection

instrument, the researcher has the propensity to determine the participant types, population, and sampling required to present valuable findings based on participant responses.

Fair participant selection is a requirement that incorporates four distinct principles together to yield divergent obligations: fair inclusion, fair burden sharing, fair opportunity, and fair distribution of risks (MacKay et al., 2020). It can be difficult to gain access to willing participants as a qualitative researcher. The participants selected for the study must have the necessary experience with the phenomenon being studied. The participant recruitment or selection process can make finding potential participants challenging; they have to have a specific experience and be willing to share their views with the researcher. Qualitative data is often obtained through exchanges with participants utilizing interviews, surveys, or focus groups; as a result, the researcher needs to select participants who are also willing to express their experiences fully and truthfully to the researcher. The most knowledgeable researcher cannot explore a research topic without honest and willing participants to aid in the study.

Types of Individuals

The purpose of this flexible qualitative single case study was to expand the understanding behind West Virginia's higher education institutions' inability to successfully implement changes and its effect on student outcomes. The research sought to determine the driving factors related to distributed leadership and see if there is a specific influence on the ability to successfully implement changes in the higher education administrative environment. As a result of the research topic, the granularity of the types of individuals who are eligible to participate in this study was individuals who are currently employed or may have previously been employed by a higher education institution. The research in this study focused on leadership. Due to the hierarchical management structures in higher education, it was beneficial to engage anyone

employed by a higher education institution in West Virginia to participate as part of the population. Additionally, the individuals selected as participants would be those prepared, possess the relevant experience related to the distributed leadership phenomena, and are willing to participate in the research study.

Population and Sampling

A research population is commonly described as a large collection of individuals that are the focus of a study. In statistics, a population refers to an entire group about which some information is required to be ascertained (Banerjee & Chaudhury, 2010). Due to the constraints of large population sizes, researchers cannot easily test every participant in the population because it is too costly and time-consuming to be completed in a practical manner. The inability of researchers to test every participant is why researchers tend to rely on sampling techniques. A population is a set of people with specialized characteristics, and a sample is a subset of the identified population. A population is an entire group that the researcher wants to analyze and develop conclusions. A sample is a more specific subgroup that the research aims to collect the data from (Banerjee & Chaudhury, 2010). As a rule, the sample size is always smaller than the size of the population. Additionally, a population can mean more than just a group of people. A population can also contain a cross-section of subjects such as industries, organizations, states, countries, etc. Population research is limited by unintentional biases introduced by excluding sub-populations from the sample and by non-response bias introduced when select participants do not participate (Rehm et al., 2021).

Discussion of Population

For this study, the researcher expected to utilize participants actively employed in the state of West Virginia higher education industry as the target population. The researcher utilized

a variety of employees, both faculty and staff, from a four-year higher education public institution in West Virginia. The selection identified and included only personnel who have been employed with the institution for a minimum of one year. This was accomplished utilizing a criteria selection letter during solicitation. The selection of employees of public institutions as the target population suggests that the school would also be a part of the West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission system of schools (WVHEPC, 2021). The individuals who could participate would include those employed by both private and public institutions in the state. The participants could be from four-year institutions, two-year institutions, community and technical college system institutions, or the West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission that oversees public four-year institutions in West Virginia (WVHEPC, 2021).

The study utilized West Virginia as the setting, further limiting the types of individuals selected as participants. The population consisted of faculty and staff at public four-year institutions in West Virginia. The researcher did not utilize their work environment to avoid bias, complications related to hierarchical relationships, and other job-related pressures that could adversely influence the study. Using one's coworkers or employees as experimental participants raise concerns about bias in results and research ethics (Radun et al., 2018; 2019). The researcher constructed the study so that participants did not feel as though they were pressured into participating in the interview or survey questions. The researcher carefully considered all the types of individuals who may be involved and their relationships with the researcher. As a result, the researcher attempted to identify employees at an institution whereby the researcher had limited or no personal connection. The researcher used strategies designed to recruit potential employee participants that minimize the possibility of coercion, pressure, or influence. The researcher identified language that indicates participation was optional and not mandatory.

Discussion of Sampling

It is doubtful that a researcher would be able to collect data from all cases; as a result, the researcher must select a smaller subset known as a sample. A sample is merely a subset of the population being studied. The concept of sampling arises from the researcher's inability to test all individuals in a population. Sampling only leads to representatives of a particular population if the sample includes all of the important groups being studied (Rehm et al., 2021). The sample size must fully represent the population from which the sample was drawn. The sample size needs to reflect the representational accuracy of the population as best as possible to contribute valuable information to the field. Even undertaking the initial sampling process, a researcher can never completely determine who participates in a study (Gentles & Vilches, 2017).

The participants included in the sample were 20 full-time employees, and they were faculty and staff members employed for a minimum of one year by a West Virginia university. The sample was collected using purposeful selection to identify the university; then, convenience sampling techniques were used to select the remaining participants. The population of all higher education institutions in West Virginia is too large of a group or population to study. Thus, the researcher provided an email request letter to the human resources department and IRB for one school outlining the overview of the study and the formal request to conduct virtual interviews and open-ended surveys. Accounting for biases characteristically found in surveys, the researcher used triangulation to strengthen the study results. The researcher also calculated estimates for groups outside the sample and combined sampling with new methodologies such as computer-assisted web interviews (Rehm et al., 2021).

The DSL guide for this program requires the student to sample a minimum of 15-30 participants (*Doctor of Strategic Leadership Research Project Guide*, n.d.). The sample size for

this study included 20 participants. Creswell (1998) suggested that the researcher plan to sample between 20 to 30 participants. Sample size determination for research studies that utilize open-ended questions or qualitative interviews relies primarily on finding the point where little new information is obtained, known as thematic saturation (Weller et al., 2018). Saturation is used in qualitative research as the researcher's conditions to stop or discontinue further data collection for analysis. It is used to determine when there is enough data to develop a valid understanding of the phenomena in the study. Weller et al. (2018) found that similar responses were not independent across respondents and that saturation may never be reached. Weller et al. (2018) further explained that instead of complete saturation, using a goal such as a percentage of the total domain and the average prevalence of items one would like to observe to estimate the appropriate sample size. Theoretical saturation occurs when the complete range of constructs that make up the theory is fully represented by the data (Saunders et al., 2018). Saunders et al. (2018) noted that conceptual categories have been pre-established through existing theory. It is significant in this respect that the researcher links saturation with the notion of content validity.

Selecting a Sampling Method

Researchers use probability and non-probability sampling methods when they attempt to learn about a population (Scholtz, 2021). Purposeful sampling denotes the researcher being most effective with limited resources by selecting information-rich cases to sample as a part of the study (Scholtz, 2021). Purposeful non-random samples include snowball sampling techniques, where one case identifies others who might be willing to participate. Researchers can also engage with convenient samples of readily available groups and quota sampling to select a fixed number from each group (Banerjee & Chaudhury, 2010). For example, in probability sampling,

every participant in the entire population has an equal chance of being selected to be included in the sample.

Non-probability sampling and convenience sampling are often connected to case study research designs and qualitative research studies (Scholtz, 2021). Case studies focus on small samples that explore real-life phenomena and do not attempt to make any type of statistical inferences about the larger population. The sample of participants does not need to be a random representation; the sample does need to provide a clear, logical explanation for the inclusion of some cases or participants and why others are not selected. This study utilized a non-probability sampling method; the research intends to apply purposeful and convenience sampling as the most appropriate method for this study.

Purposeful and Convenience Sampling

The researcher used purposeful sampling to create a list of potential participants. The researcher then used convenience sampling by contacting those on the list of potential participants. Individuals willing to participate were included in the sample, thereby engaging in convenience sampling. Convenience sampling is when the researcher selects a sample of participants because the participants are readily and easily available to contribute to the study. Descriptions of the participant sample and the sampling process should be treated as separate elements of a study; since sampling is a product of the methods employed (Gentles & Vilches, 2017). Convenience sampling is often a preferred sampling method because it is inexpensive and provides easier selection options over other sampling methods. Convenience sampling is beneficial because of the flexibility in selection, and it is often the least costly option available to the researcher. For example, other sampling methods, such as specific probability methods, including types such as stratified sampling, are more expensive than convenience samples

(Scholtz, 2021). The disadvantages of convenience sampling include unintended selection bias and sampling not being representative of an entire population. To counter the impact of bias as part of convenience sampling on external validity, the researcher can include statements that identify the sampling method as a limitation (Scholtz, 2021). West Virginia higher education employees are convenient for the researcher to attempt to reach due to the network created by the West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission. As an employee of another West Virginia public state institution, the researcher can leverage their social network in contacting participants.

Summary of Population and Sampling

This section provided an overview of the research participants, population, and sampling. The introduction to this section described the definitions of participants, populations, and sampling before further defining the target group types for each of these types. The high-level overview described how the participants were identified by selecting a broad population and then further refining the potential participants based on the research questions. Next, a discussion around why sampling techniques are important in qualitative research ensued. The researcher then identified which sampling techniques would be most appropriate for this type of research. The researcher also highlighted the benefits and disadvantages of several sampling techniques. The researcher further explained ways to counteract the disadvantages. Finally, the section touched briefly on how the researcher intended to conduct the research with the participants chosen in the sample.

Data Collection

Obtaining data for a research study is a fundamental step conducted during the research process. This section under data collection explored the data collection plan and highlighted the

methods used to gather data from participants. The data collection tools were further broken down into interview guides, surveys, and archival data. The next section reviewed the data organization process that allowed the researcher to collect data and organize it into useful content for analysis. Data analysis and triangulation analysis were also discussed to demonstrate validity before concluding with the summary. The summary then transitions into the next section that further reviews validity, reliability, and bracketing before summarizing that section. Data collection is considered the fundamental process of gathering, measuring, and analyzing information in an established systematic fashion that enables the researcher to answer the previously stated research questions, examine hypotheses from multiple angles, and assess appropriate outcomes.

Data Collection Plan

Obtaining data for a research study is a fundamental step conducted during the research process. This section under data collection explored the data collection plan and determined the methods used to gather data from the participants. Additionally, the tools were further broken down into interview guides, surveys, and archival data. Data analysis and triangulation analysis were outlined before concluding with the summary. The summary then transitions into the next section that further reviews validity, reliability, and bracketing before summarizing that section. The data collection process for the researcher is considered the fundamental process of gathering, measuring, or analyzing information in an established systematic fashion that enables the researcher to answer the previously stated research questions, examine hypotheses from multiple angles, and assess appropriate outcomes.

The data collection plan for this qualitative research study explained what data was collected and how that data was used in the research. The purpose of creating a data collection

plan was that the plan helped ensure that the data collected was useful to the researcher and that the data was collected appropriately. Qualitative research designs are different from quantitative research design methods; thus, researchers should be mindful when selecting data collection methods. Furthermore, the researcher should be aware of how the data is collected and analyzed in qualitative research (Setia, 2017). The most basic version of qualitative data collection is through open-ended interview questions (Moser & Korstjens, 2017; 2018). One of the most frequently used data collection methods in qualitative research is interviews; interviews are a data collection method in which the researcher asks the participant questions (Moser & Korstjens, 2017; 2018). Common in qualitative research is combining more than one data collection method in an unstructured and flexible manner (Moser & Korstjens, 2017; 2018). Due to the flexible and unstructured nature of qualitative research, the researcher needs to select appropriate data collection methods and use those methods to develop a holistic analysis. An interview is a conversation where the researcher poses questions and the participants provide answers in multiple ways, such as face-to-face, telephone, or mail correspondence (Moser & Korstjens, 2017; 2018). Another means of conducting interviews was through online virtual meetings conducted via remote meeting platforms such as Teams, Webex, Zoom, or other online meeting services. The data collection plan for this study intended to utilize a combination of interviews, open-ended surveys, and archived case studies of peer-reviewed scholarly research within the last five years. However, the researcher did not utilize the open-ended surveys due to a lack of response. Surveys were sent to a small subset of participants, but none returned the survey after multiple attempts to solicit responses. The data and response sheets were stored in the researcher's personal Liberty University Microsoft One Drive account. The system provided

version control and acted as a central repository for data that prevented unintentional alteration of any of the documents.

Instruments

Data collection and subsequent instruments are an important beginning step in the qualitative research process. The instrument of data collection chosen by the researcher to collect the data depends on the type of data being collected and how the researcher plans to use it. When conducting interviews, the instruments include the researcher and the interview questions (Roberts, 2020). The researcher acted as the primary data collection instrument and planned to utilize a combination of multiple instruments to conduct the research. The researcher utilized interviews to collect qualitative data and are very popular because of the flexibility this tool provides. Additionally, open-ended surveys allowed participants flexibility to respond without the inconvenience of a recorded interview. The combination of both the interview and survey allowed participants an option of modality to participate in the study. Study instrumentation refers to tools used by researchers to collect items of interest during the data collection process found in the attached interview guide (see Appendix A) and attached surveys (see Appendix B). The researcher, acting as a data collection instrument, must be actively engaged in the process, proficiently respond to the research participant, and recognize the researcher's impact on the process and outcome of the interview (Roberts, 2020). While the researcher conducted 20 virtual interviews and sent out 6 copies of the survey questions, none of the participants returned survey results in the findings. As a result, the survey questions were not used in the study findings.

Interview Guides

In qualitative research interviews, the researcher develops an interview guide to reference during the interview process in advance of the participant interviews. The interview guide is

comprised of a list of questions that the researcher covers during the interviews with the participants. Developing an interview guide with potential follow-up questions helps researchers stay on track, provides the IRB with a plan for what the researcher wants to focus on in the interviews, and prompts the researcher to investigate from every angle (Roberts, 2020).

Individual interviews were the principal method used to collect data from participants in this study. Participants were asked to provide their response in the way they understood it and to raise any additional topics they believed were important to discuss during the interview. As a result of using an interview guide, each interview flowed a little differently, so there was some deviation in content from one participant to the next. The researcher attempted to cover all the questions in the research guide and any other topics presented by the participant for discussion. An experienced researcher must be able to ask the appropriate questions from the guide, listen to the participant's response, and pick up on both verbal and non-verbal cues. They must also know when it is an appropriate time to follow up with another more in-depth question, move on to the next question, or let the participant speak freely without interruption.

The interviews were conducted one-on-one, using the Microsoft Teams online meeting platform accessible to everyone via a web browser or application. The participant interview sessions and transcripts were recorded using the platform software. The most important skill is for researchers to actively listen to participants (Roberts, 2020). The research utilized the written transcription service provided by the online meeting platform to convert the auditory interview into a text-based alternative after the session. The need to convert the audio file to a text-based one allowed the researcher to identify patterns and themes more easily because the written words made it easier to codify the transcripts. After a brief introduction, the following interview guide questions were presented to each participant selected for the interview. The interview questions

were established by focusing on the outcomes the research expected to obtain from the research questions guiding this study. The researcher marked each interview question to explain how that question related to a specific research question.

An interview guide is a vital tool used to support the researcher's capacity to conduct an interview that asks questions relevant to the research topic. The interview guide aids the researcher in providing reliability in the interview process and acts as a tool that connects the research problem being explored to the research questions (Roberts, 2020). The interview guide is included in the appendix (see Appendix A). The researcher started the interview with a brief introduction by asking participants to introduce themselves, including their names and educational history. The researcher reminded participants that participation is voluntary, provided an overview of confidentiality, and discussed the research study goals. The researcher incorporated an opening statement that described distributed leadership in a similar capacity to shared leadership. The researcher further defined distributed leadership as the ability of an organization to empower individuals and allow them to take on responsibility in leadership positions in their areas of expertise. This introduction was to help ensure that all participants were starting from a similar knowledge base before asking questions that dealt directly with distributed leadership. The researcher used personal judgment on whether to include the statement after hearing the individual's background. The use of an informal, semi-unstructured interview guide allows the researcher flexibility and transparency during the exchange in an interview (Roberts, 2020).

Research question one asked why leaders fail to apply distributed leadership in higher education and what behaviors support the success or failure of adopting distributed leadership. The interview guide (see Appendix A) first questions asked participants to introduce themselves.

Once introductions and permissions were complete, the researcher began the interviews. Question two asked participants to provide background on their knowledge and or experience with leadership. A list of potential follow-up questions provided the researcher with additional specifying questions if needed. Specifying questions help subjects offer more specific information within their answers, explore any associations involved, and explore responses, thoughts, actions, and reactions more thoroughly (Roberts, 2020). Question three aimed to shift the conversation into a more overarching conversation to begin exploring leadership challenges facing higher education today. Follow-up questions were structured to elicit a prompter response from participants by exploring how the participants viewed or felt about the challenges they identified. Structuring questions keep the subject focused on the topic being investigated or prompt a subject to move forward, which is especially useful if the study is organized by specific concepts or themes (Roberts, 2020). Question four explored leadership and professional development by asking about formal and informal opportunities. Question four led to an open-ended question five that prompted participants to reflect on whether the organization or boss provided them personally with leadership responsibilities. This led the participants to question six to ask if the participant supervises or manages employees, and do they offer them additional opportunities or responsibilities. Follow-up questions sought to ask for background or any relevant details. Questions seven and eight asked the participants to describe the characteristics of a good leader and a poor leader to identify behaviors that support or fail to support distributed leadership.

Research question two asked how students have impacted different initiatives from other change initiatives in higher education. Question nine asks participants to change direction by examining how the organization governs projects. The follow-up questions prompt further

discussion from the participant to examine how their organization connects student experience to project selection. Question 10 asked whether the institution adopted change initiatives to benefit students and included follow-up questions to explore project selection, differences, and their feelings more thoroughly on change.

Research question three asked what elements of distributed leadership were present in higher education that positions institutions for success in implementing changes to improve student outcomes. Question 11 asked the participant to examine how they see leadership's influence on the institution's culture. Follow-up questions prompted the participants to examine the organization's culture further, what is working, are changes being implemented, and what they would change. Question 12 asked participants to look at the interactions between individuals in their organization to explore leadership styles. Question 13 asked participants whether those with skills or expertise have an opportunity to take on leadership roles. The follow-up questions sought to answer questions about culture, empowerment, and opportunities for those who want to take on that next role. Question 14 explored if the participants felt distributed leadership was present or beneficial to the organization. Lastly, question 15 asks for any additional information the participants felt could be beneficial to the study. The researcher left additional time at the end of the interview to debrief. The time was also used for participants who finished early. Researchers should allow time to discuss the participants' experiences in the interview, inquire about concerns regarding what was shared, or address questions that might have come up either about the study or how the information shared will be used (Roberts, 2020).

Surveys

Qualitative surveys consist of a series of open-ended questions crafted by the researcher and centered on a particular topic (Braun et al., 2020). These surveys are completely self-

administered, questions are always presented in a standard format. Participants respond by typing responses in their own words rather than selecting from predetermined response options (Braun et al., 2020). The benefit of fully qualitative surveys is that they produce rich and complex accounts of the type of participants' subjective experiences, narratives, practices, positionings, and discourse (Braun et al., 2020). Surveys are typically used in large-scale quantitative or mixed methods research and can appear ill-suited to the small-scale samples of qualitative social research, but that is not the case (Braun et al., 2020).

The method involved using open-ended questions that were presented to participants in written format. Simple, everyday words can be misunderstood in a survey setting, so writing basic understandable questions can be daunting (Brenner, 2017). The researcher provided some additional commentary to help contextualize the information and definitions to help participants understand the viewpoint of the qualitative survey questions. This additional commentary is especially helpful since the researcher cannot directly answer questions for the participants in real-time. A downside to using online surveys was that the researcher cannot always clarify participant responses, resulting in incomplete or vague data. Utilizing an in-person interview guide and offering surveys allowed the researcher to sample additional participants, helping to increase the study's validity. Additionally, a benefit of the online version of the questions allowed participants to spend more time considering their responses and thoughtfully craft or adjust their replies. However, a few potential participants did not reply or submit their responses, and one other mentioned it would take too long to write the responses.

Qualitative survey research is a less structured methodology used to gain information about participants' reasoning and motivations. Open-ended survey questions were structured in the form of a text box survey that allowed participants to provide a full response. See Appendix

B for the open-ended questions that allowed participants to express their thoughts on the questions being asked. The researcher used the descriptive style survey data to help support the qualitative research by allowing for a larger sample size that makes results more credible and valid. However, the researcher received no surveys, so the survey was not included.

Fully qualitative surveys harness the potential of qualitative data given online delivery options (Braun et al., 2020). To help supplement the virtual meeting interview data, the researcher planned to also solicit the same interview questions via a survey delivered through the web and over email. Since the interview and survey questions were structured the same way, the research questions were applied in the same manner. Research question one asked why leaders fail to use distributed leadership in higher education and what behaviors support the success or failure of adopting distributed leadership. Survey guide question one asked participants to introduce themselves. Question two asked participants to provide background on their knowledge and or experience with leadership. Question three explored leadership challenges facing higher education today. Question four discovered leadership and professional development by asking about formal and informal opportunities. Question five prompted participants to reflect on their career as to whether the organization or boss has provided them with leadership responsibilities. Question six asked if the participant supervises or manages employees and if they offer those same opportunities or responsibilities. Questions seven and eight asked the participant to describe the characteristics of a good leader and a poor leader to identify behaviors that support or fail to support distributed leadership. Research question two asked how initiatives that impact students were different from other change initiatives in higher education. Question nine asked participants to reflect and discuss how their organization governs projects. Question 10 asked whether the institution adopted change initiatives to benefit students.

Research question three asked what elements of distributed leadership were present in higher education that positions institutions for success in implementing changes to improve student outcomes. Question 11 on the survey guide asked the participants to examine how they see leadership's influence on the institution's culture. Question 12 asked participants to reflect on interactions between individuals in their organization to explore leadership styles. Question 13 asked participants whether individuals with skills or expertise have an opportunity to take on leadership roles. Question 14 explored if the participant felt distributed leadership was present or would be beneficial to their organization. Lastly, question 15 asked for any additional information the participant felt would benefit the study. Qualitative surveys are positive for inclusion; however, a disadvantage is that they require literacy, online delivery risks can exclude underprivileged and vulnerable groups (Braun et al., 2020). This study was being conducted at a higher education institution, so it is assumed participants have general literacy skills. Survey responses may lack the additional detail of an interview transcript. Still, if surveys are a good fit for the research question, topic, and population, then the dataset will likely be rich and complex (Braun et al., 2020).

Archival Data

Archival data refers to data or information previously collected and exists in other research or files. One benefit of using archival data is that it is easier and less time-consuming than collecting new data to be used exclusively as a researcher. Archival data makes it possible for those with inadequate resources to conduct a more thorough evaluation of the studies being explored. This research study did not use archival information and included only the specific data collected from the interviews.

Data Organization

A key part of qualitative research is data collection and organization. Researchers must combine, process, and analyze large data sets to obtain the necessary evidence of patterns and correlations to support the research. When a researcher is performing data analysis, it is crucial to be organized and systematic when documenting all the data, including the steps taken. As a researcher, the strategies incorporated for arranging, organizing, collecting, storing, retrieving, and analyzing qualitative data must be efficient to allow the researcher an appropriate method to manage the voluminous collection of words. In simple terms, organization is crucial to a researcher's ability to analyze data competently.

Qualitative research often relies on the words of participants. Summary descriptions conducted by researchers for qualitative data, especially interviews, have continuously proven to be a difficult task to represent visually. The data is qualitative text-based transcriptions of words rather than numerical outputs for quantitative data (Pokorny et al., 2018). To keep transparency in qualitative research, a method of data organization must seek to offer data visualization through reproducible tools (Pokorny et al., 2018). Pokorny et al. (2018) suggested creating classification systems using chronological locations of a code structure applied to the transcription text, resulting in a visualization that illustrates the interrelations of the codes to the data. The researcher planned to use a coding system to identify themes in the research data collection. The notes were categorized in a manner that attempted to align the responses to the research questions being explored. Additionally, the researcher wrote down any ancillary thoughts from the interviews was coded but kept separately to prevent unintentional bias.

Summary of Data Collection

This section provided an overview of the data collection plan and the important role the process plays in obtaining data for a research study. The introduction to the section described the purpose of creating a data collection plan to ensure that the data collected was useful to the researcher. Next, the plan detailed the instruments used in the data collection process. The overview described the researcher, interviews, surveys, and peer-reviewed case studies as instruments for data collection. Next, each instrument was explored more in-depth to describe how the tool was used in the study. The following section provided insight into the interview guide and questions that participants were asked during the interviews. Then each of the interview guide questions was associated with how it addressed each research question. The final section explained the importance of organizing the data to aid the researcher in analyzing the data.

Data Analysis

Qualitative research studies mainly produce unstructured written data. Data analysis is distinctively different between qualitative and quantitative research methods. Quantitative methods are technical or statistical, and qualitative research is more intuitive and involves a creative process that includes more inductive reasoning and theorizing on behalf of the researcher. Qualitative research studies focus on further exploring intangible concepts such as morals, ethics, significances, beliefs, opinion, thoughts, experiences, and participants' feelings (Wong, 2008). Data analysis as a part of qualitative research is methodically examining and organizing the participant interview transcripts, any researcher observation notes, or other materials that the researcher has accumulated to increase the understanding of the phenomenon being studied (Wong, 2008).

Qualitative Analysis

The researcher planned to utilize a coding approach to segment the data collection for analysis and identify themes. The researcher categorizes data segments with a code and uses the codes to sort through the data collected and develop a code system. These codes assist the researcher with understanding what is happening in the situation being studied (Maher, 2018). Researchers find that coding using traditional tools such as colored pens, highlighters, paper filing, and notes aids in offering a valid and tested analysis method to develop insights for qualitative analysis (Maher, 2018). The first step in the coding process is determining what coding method will be used (Skjott Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019).

Coding

Coding in qualitative research aids the researcher in conducting thematic analysis, which identifies themes through the researcher's analyses of words and sentence structures (Skjott Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). Coding in qualitative research provides a systematic analysis and creates the objectivity, thoroughness, and rigor needed for qualitative research to be accepted. Coding also allows for broad perceptions and insightfulness into the data that has been collected while making the data set more manageable and comprehensible to the researcher. Coding in qualitative research allows the researcher to sort and structure the data collected from participants. This process allows the researcher to structure the data to improve transparency, increase validity, and support the voice of participants. The researcher must recognize the dependent relationship between data organization, categorization, and theory development constructs. Coding plays a pivotal role in facilitating the researcher's ability to advance the research process (Williams & Moser, 2019). An inductive approach does not use a theoretical framework. This process allows codes to reflect the subjects of the data. Inductive coding is

appropriate when conducting an exploratory approach. Inductive coding has risks of complication and lack of focus, which should be considered. The researcher plans to use deductive coding due to a lack of experience. Deductive coding aims to narrow the focal point by classifying a pre-defined list of codes aligned with the conceptual framework before collecting data (Skjott Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). The researcher aligned the research study problem to the existent literature on the subject. Deductive coding allowed for flexibility; this approach best fits this study as the purpose of the study was to better understand the themes represented in the research.

Themes

Themes can emerge from different sources, from data as a logically learned approach, and from the researcher's prior theoretical understanding. The identification of themes is a fundamental task in qualitative research. The researcher used coding to identify trends, parallels, uniformities, and inconsistencies from participant responses that further explained personal experiences. Coding in qualitative research comprises of processes that enable the collected data to be assembled, categorized, and thematically sorted, providing an organized platform for constructing meaning (Williams & Moser, 2019). The researcher identified themes in written or interview material by looking for recurring elements. Coding methods utilize processes that reveal themes embedded in the data, suggesting thematic directionality toward categorizing data. This categorization allows the researcher to negotiate, codify, and present meaning (Williams & Moser, 2019). The researcher began the data analysis process by reviewing transcripts, replaying recordings, and reviewing any notes obtained during the interview process. The anticipated themes included instructional practices, behaviors, decision making, leader-member exchange, leadership as an emergent identity, and manager effectiveness. Each research question (see

Appendix A) attempted to elicit responses based on the anticipated themes listed above. The researcher identified those descriptive statements made by participants to aid in identifying themes. Semi-structured interviews, utilized in case study research, draw on aspects of descriptive investigations that allow a comprehensive summary of events in simple terms and allow for in-depth exploration of a specific concept (Roberts et al., 2019).

Open and Axial Coding

Open coding aids in flexibility and alignment with qualitative research studies. Open coding is the first level whereby the researcher identifies distinct concepts and themes for categorization (Williams & Moser, 2019). The first step in the open coding process aims to express data in the form of concepts. This is accomplished by classifying expressions, single words, and short sequences of words to attach annotations and concepts (Williams & Moser, 2019).

Open coding in qualitative research presents opportunities for sub-coding data. Axial coding is the second level of coding, which focuses on identifying emergent themes. Axial coding further refines, aligns, and categorizes the themes (Williams & Moser, 2019). Axial coding essentially identifies relationships among the open codes and determines what connections exist among the codes. A code was developed for each of the research anticipated themes by creating short descriptive words that were used later to identify content. The axial code sought to identify connections from each of the themes to the research questions and sub-questions. The first research question explored how leaders fail to apply distributed leadership by exploring attributes and characteristics that support or fail to support this leadership style. The second question focused on how administrative projects differ from student-facing initiatives. The third question explored what elements of distributed leadership place an institution to

succeed in implementing changes that improve student outcomes. The coding process identified participants' responses aligned with the anticipated theme and the appropriate research question. This process promoted understanding of the themes identified in the data analysis phase.

Analysis for Triangulation

Triangulation aims to increase the reliability and legitimacy of the findings presented in the research. The researcher uses multiple data collection processes and analyses to accomplish research objectives, which benefits from triangulation (Alam, 2020; 2021). This case study utilized the data or source triangulation method. The data triangulation technique provides corroboration from different informers from varying times, and the presence of that variation contributes to the study's confidence. Case study research lends well to data triangulation techniques by combining text, survey, and interview data to explore analytical angles across time (Kern, 2018). Case studies utilize multiple data sources as a part of triangulation by including interviews and surveys. This study utilized interviews and surveys to compare data points from those participants with different levels of experience and expertise. The researcher anticipated that triangulation would occur by determining what outcomes were agreed upon by all of the various group members participating in the interviews. The interview evidence across departments suggests that if every group explores an issue from varying points of view, it is more likely to validate the research. Another type of triangulation the researcher used was theoretical triangulation. Case study quality depends on access to raw data, explanation of cases, multiple data sources, and the link between theory and evidence to provide data triangulation (Farquhar et al., 2020). Theoretical triangulation is where insight is gained from looking at data sets from different theoretical perspectives, engaging in data analysis using theoretical lenses, and theory-building to account for the divergent explanations (Farquhar et al., 2020).

Qualitative and Quantitative Triangulation

Triangulation uses more than one approach to explore a research question. The objective of triangulation for both quantitative and qualitative research is to improve the confidence levels of the findings. The confidence level of quantitative research can be improved by confirmation of a proposal that uses a combination of independent measures. The combination of findings provides a comprehensive picture of the results. The combination of qualitative and quantitative data can lead to clashes in philosophical assumptions behind each approach. Therefore, recommendations have been made for triangulation to be carried out from a pragmatic approach (Tonkin-Crine et al., 2016). Research methods are traditionally labeled as qualitative or quantitative to conform to research paradigms that have received attention in the scholarly community (Chu & Ke, 2017).

Qualitative Analysis Methods

Qualitative analysis measures something by its quality rather than quantity. Qualitative research does not operate on pre-determined variables but through explorative interviews, observations, and notes (Taguchi, 2018). An extensive review of qualitative research summarizes its characteristics as open, holistic, flexible, noncontrolling, and case-oriented (Chu & Ke, 2017). Scientific inquiry involves a repetitive relationship between theoretical ideas and empirical evidence (Lo et al., 2020). The qualitative analysis explores why a phenomenon happens by utilizing research methods such as questionnaires, surveys, focus groups, observations, and case studies to produce results. Qualitative research aims to explore and understand the social reality of a person, groups of people, and cultures as much as possible. Qualitative research is an inventive and interpretive process. The researcher creates qualitative interpretations, and several

techniques are used to make sense of the data, such as content or thematic analysis. The qualitative process involves:

- Evaluating the data.
 - Performing the coding process.
 - Searching for themes in the data.
 - Reviewing the themes.
 - Defining the themes.
- Producing the analysis of the extracts that serve as the platform for the population's representation within the study.

Quantitative Analysis

Quantitative analysis measures quantity rather than quality. The researcher is expected to turn numbers into meaningful data through critical thinking, variables, frequency, and data sets differences in quantitative data analysis. Quantitative data works with larger data sets that require computer software to help perform statistical analysis. When a researcher undertakes quantitative analysis, they engage with numerical facts, measures, and percentages through descriptive and inferential statistics (Taguchi, 2018). Descriptive statistics provide information about data distribution, such as frequency, mean, and standard deviation (Taguchi, 2018). Inferential statistics involve a set of statistical techniques that researchers generalize, such as t-tests, correlation, ANOVA, regression, and structural equation modeling (Taguchi, 2018). The quantitative analysis seeks to determine what happened by utilizing research methods such as sampling, statistical analysis, large sets of data, and analytical comparisons to produce numerical or measurable data. Quantitative research aims to test theory and support or reject the outcome. Quantitative data is produced by a study that is designed before the data collection begins;

therefore, these experiments do not take place in a natural setting. Additionally, large data sets are needed to ensure accurate analysis. Quantitative data is understood using statistical analysis, and statistics are based on mathematics, so the quantitative approach is viewed as scientifically objective compared to qualitative methods.

Summary for Data Analysis

Qualitative research studies produce written data that requires the researcher to analyze and sort the data carefully. Data analysis and triangulation for this study was based on qualitative approaches. Data analysis is the main feature of qualitative research that distinguishes it from quantitative research methods. Quantitative methods are not applicable to this study. Qualitative research studies explore intangible concepts such as morals, beliefs, opinions, and thoughts. Data analysis as a part of qualitative research requires the researcher to methodically examine and organize the participant interview transcripts, researcher observation notes, or other materials that the researcher has accumulated to increase the understanding of the phenomenon being studied (Wong, 2008). Data analysis as part of qualitative research systematically searches and arranges materials that the researcher amasses to help the researcher increase the understanding of the phenomenon.

Reliability and Validity

Reliability and validity are concepts that researchers incorporate into a study as an evaluation tool to gauge the quality of research. Reliability pertains to the consistency of a measure, and validity relates to the accuracy of the measure. Reliability and validity are key concepts in all types of research. Researchers proclaim that qualitative research's rigor and trustworthiness parallel the concepts, reliability, and validity of all the necessary components of quality research (Cypress, 2017). Case study research lends well to the recommended practice of

using data triangulation. Case studies can use multiple methods within the data source triangulation, such as interviews, surveys, and observations to test validity. This study focused on utilizing interviews and surveys by comparing collected data from varying contexts and individuals with different levels of experience and expertise.

Reliability

Reliability is the extent to which results are consistent over time. The replication of research findings is an important step in traditional quantitative research. Replication of research findings improves the accuracy of hypotheses, whereas a lack of replication decreases confidence in hypotheses (Collingridge & Gantt, 2019). Reliability contains a particular notion of stability in the results found by the researcher, which means that the results can be repeated over time (Hayashi et al., 2019). Additionally, reliability aims to present an accurate representation of the total population; if the results can be produced again and again, then the research instrument was reliable. Reliability is concerned with how trustworthy and believable the study results were. Trustworthiness is related to credibility as a substitute for validity.

Trustworthiness is comparable to credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability definitions. Presenting accurate reconstructions is one thing researchers mean when they discuss a study's trustworthiness (Jones & Donmoyer, 2021). Reliability in qualitative research requires the researcher to adopt methods accepted by the research community as legitimate ways of collecting and analyzing data (Collingridge & Gantt, 2019). Reliability in qualitative research is often described as the stability of responses to multiple data sets. Stewart et al. (2017) explained that validity and reliability had been replaced with terms such as credibility and trustworthiness. Indicated by credibility, the trustworthiness of findings is reflected in the representation of the population with many feasible perceptions reconstructed in

the data (Stewart et al., 2017). Ongoing incorporation, reflection, and interaction by the qualitative researcher with the data collection, analysis, and interpretation processes construct trustworthiness that constant comparison and chain of the evidence establishes (Stewart et al., 2017). This chain of evidence establishes the transferability, dependability, and confirmability needed to produce reliability in the findings.

The researcher documented the research process as thoroughly as possible to allow for the reliability of replicable steps. The researcher provided credibility to the study by ensuring that the research process is transferable to other situations that enable further research studies. Acceptability, transferability, reliability, and verifiability were used to assess the validity, accuracy, and reliability of the qualitative data produced in this study. Reliability is a concept used for testing or evaluating quantitative research, but reliability can be used in all types of research. To confirm reliability in qualitative research, examination of trustworthiness is critical. The researcher must select a representative sample size for interviews and surveys used for both validity and reliability (Hayashi et al., 2019). Qualitative researchers who adopt reliable, qualitative methods and skillfully conduct their analyses produce results that enhance the understanding that people attach to phenomena (Collingridge & Gantt, 2019).

Validity

Validity is described as the confidence with which conclusions can be drawn from an analysis with which a research procedure will evaluate a phenomenon in the same way over several attempts (Hayashi et al., 2019). Legitimacy is concerned with the validity of accurately reflecting the ideas and concepts being investigated in the research. Validity is measured by what one purports to measure in qualitative research, which means selecting an appropriate method for a given question and applying that method in a comprehensible, reasonable, and rigorous manner

(Collingridge & Gantt, 2019). Validity determines whether the researcher has measured what they intended to measure. Additionally, the study's validity also aims to explore how truthful the research results are. Validity is described in a range of terms associated with qualitative studies. This universal concept explains that a contingent construct is inescapably grounded in the processes and intentions of research methodologies and projects. The researcher verified each participant's personal details such as name, institution, and employment history. This step confirmed the participants were truthful during the initial engagement to support their personal experiences. This study relied on descriptive validity. Descriptive validity is when the researcher does not embellish the information, situations, and facts reported. The researcher functioned independently of the observations and descriptions with the theory used in the research (Hayashi et al., 2019). Validity was also achieved through saturation. Saturation is used in qualitative research when the researcher stops or discontinues further data collection for analysis needed to understand the phenomena in the study. Failure to reach saturation has an adverse impact on the quality of the research conducted and hampers content validity. Saturation is the top issue among researchers focusing on enhancing rigor and validity in qualitative research studies. Data triangulation methods provide triangulation from different people at different times, and that variation attempts to contribute to reliability and validity. Triangulation forms the interrelationship between the information obtained from the data collected from different sources to increase the understanding of the study in question, thus improving the reliability and validity of the results (Hayashi et al., 2019).

Member checking is commonly used in qualitative research to maintain validity and is integral in creating trustworthiness in qualitative research (Candela, 2019). Member checking is when the researcher asks participants in the study to check the accuracy of their interview

accounts. This member check includes reviewing the findings with the participants and asking them about the report's accuracy (Candela, 2019). Researchers can ask participants whether the description is complete and accurate and if the interpretations were fair and representative of their statement. In qualitative research, researchers use multiple sources of evidence to increase validity. Researchers must be able to describe validity as the trustworthiness of the data and claim the quality of evidence needs to be apparent throughout a study. Member checking provides a way for the researcher to ensure the accurate portrayal of participant voices by allowing participants the opportunity to confirm or deny the accuracy and interpretations of data, thus adding credibility to the qualitative study (Candela, 2019). As qualitative researchers understand those involved in their study, they should consider the context of their research while thinking through how the member checking process could affect participants (Candela, 2019).

Bracketing

Bracketing is a process in qualitative research to diminish the potential adverse effects of preconceptions that may influence the research process (Tufford & Newman, 2012). This section detailed the researcher's bracketing techniques to address the bias that can be introduced while exploring anticipated themes. Qualitative researchers must consider what type of bracketing is appropriate for themselves and the research being investigated; the bracketing methods are not mutually exclusive and may complement one another (Tufford & Newman, 2012).

Project conceptualization is the first stage of the research, with the primary challenge being to identify how unacknowledged preconceptions can adversely influence the process before beginning (Tufford & Newman, 2012). The researcher used the qualitative research method of bracketing through the thorough documentation of writing personal memos throughout the data collection and analysis process. This process includes writing memos that

assist the researcher in examining and reflecting upon the engagement with the participant and the data in the form of theoretical notes. Bracketing helps the researcher manage emotional reactions to assist in noticing subtle differences in the way questions are posed to participants or the interviewer's body language (Tufford & Newman, 2012). The researcher had a reminder checklist to focus on posing the questions in the same manner to each participant. The theoretical notes attempted to describe my personal cognitive developments during the interview and research processes. Note-taking can aid the researcher in helping to uncover themes that increase the researcher's clarity and engagement with participants' experiences. Bracketing supports the iterative process of qualitative research whereby emerging data collection may raise additional questions to be pursued. The researcher can use cues from the researcher's experience and emerging interpretations to augment questions for further data collection (Tufford & Newman, 2012). Taking notes allows the researcher to further explore important insights that are needed to keep an open mind to thoroughly examine the research for alternative perspectives. These insights include acknowledging preconceptions. Writing down one's assumptions frees the researcher to engage more fully with the raw data. The outcome of bracketing leaves the researcher with phenomena as experienced through reflections of persons, communities, social formations, and cultural work that provide the researcher with themes for investigation (Soule & Freeman, 2019).

Summary of Reliability and Validity

Reliability and validity must be incorporated into a study to gauge the quality of the research. The research only enhances the field of study if it is reliable and valid. The rigor and trustworthiness of qualitative research are very similar to the concepts of reliability and validity; they all are necessary components of qualitative research. This case study utilized the

triangulation method to analyze data from different informers and at different times, which contributed to the reliability and validity of this study. Triangulation forms the interrelationship between the information obtained from the data collected from different sources to increase the understanding of the study in question, thus improving the reliability and validity of the results (Hayashi et al., 2019).

Summary of Section 2 and Transition

Section two of the project provided the procedures that were used in this study. The purpose statement was reiterated and provided a brief overview of the research study. The role of the researcher section explained the actions that the researcher took in the study and further discussed bracketing to avoid personal bias from adversely impacting the outcomes of the research or data collection. The research methodology section provided an overview explaining the appropriateness of flexible design and a single case study for this project. Next, triangulation was explored and, more specifically, data triangulation to provide reliability and validity to the research. The discussion on participants described what types of individuals were eligible to participate in the study. The population and sampling section dissected the higher education population into sub-groups, ultimately deciding on employees who work for public four-year institutions in West Virginia for at least one year as the target population. The data collection plan provided an overview of the data being collected and how the researcher planned to do virtual interviews and surveys. The interview guides and surveys further provided the list of questions and how they pertain to the foundational research questions being explored in the study. Data organization examined coding and how the research identified trends and themes in the data. The data analysis section provided details on using coding in a case study and how triangulation helps verify that the data is not biased. Lastly, the reliability, validity, and

bracketing sections explored how the researcher aimed to ensure the data was accurate, representative of the population, and free from bias.

Section one provided a detailed overview of the introduction to this study. Section two explained the background of the problem, the problem statement, and the purpose statement for this study. This study planned to explore distributed leadership in higher education as a possibility to improve student outcomes. These outcomes can potentially benefit the student, the culture, employees, and higher education institution. The research questions were broken down into elements that explored the various components of the specific problem at a more granular level. Each question was then discussed in more detail to explain how the question related to the problem. Next, the researcher's paradigm was highlighted, discussing post-positivism, pragmatism, and constructivism. The researcher explained how their constructivist viewpoint shaped how they approached this study. Before selecting a flexible design selection, the design discussion provided details on the various styles, including fixed, flexible, and mixed methods. A discussion followed that section on methods that introduce the reader to the narrative, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, and case study approaches. The appropriateness of a single case study for this project was further detailed. Section one also included a review on triangulation and diagrams further detailing the research framework. Concepts, theories, actors, and constructs were explored to provide the reader with ample background and supporting scholarly material. Assumptions, limitations, and delimitations were also investigated. This study was reviewed to reduce the gaps in the literature, benefit leadership practices, and offer biblical integration. A complete overview of professional and academic leadership supports exploring leadership practices, strategic planning, new leadership, team empowerment, and culture.

Section two further explored the project by reiterating the purpose statement. The role of the researcher explained how the researcher conducted the study. An investigation into bias suggested bracketing to avoid personal bias. The research methodology explored the flexible single case study approach. A review of participants, population, and sampling influenced the researcher to select specific participants for this study. The data collection plan described the instruments and organization to conduct the study. Data analysis sections included: qualitative analysis, the coding process, themes, open and axial coding, and analysis for triangulation to increase the reliability and validity of the study. A thorough investigation into each of these areas provided a solid foundation on which to base the research collection and analysis. The main purpose of research studies is to inform action, gather evidence, and contribute to knowledge in the field of leadership studies. Doing this level of research before conducting the data collection helps the researcher sort through both low-quality and high-quality information to develop a thorough plan. The more research conducted on the topic before data collection, the better the researcher will be discerning what data is needed, how it relates to the study, and determine what needs to be collected to support the study. The supporting material ensured that the researcher was well prepared to begin data collection and subsequent analysis. The next step was to obtain approvals to move forward with the research data collection process.

Transition

Section three was the application to professional practice. This section opened with an introduction, followed by a section comprehensively detailing how the study was conducted. Next, this section identified ways this study can help improve general leadership practice. The section identified leadership behaviors and distributed leadership's potential impact on many industries. The researcher also covered a section detailing how leaders can utilize the findings

from this study as potential implementation strategies to adopt change initiatives. Section three also covered recommendations for further study by providing specific examples that can provide more granular research for comparison. The reflection section discussed personal and professional growth throughout the program and specifically focused on the study. Lastly, the section provided thoughts on biblical perspectives before concluding with the project's summary.

Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

This section included the overview of the study, presentation of findings, application to professional practice, recommendations for further study, reflections, biblical perspectives, and a summary of section three.

Overview of the Study

This research study began with a thorough exploration of distributed leadership in higher education. The researcher conducted a comprehensive investigation of the academic literature related to distributed leadership's impact on higher education institutions. This analysis explored the predominant issues facing higher education at public four-year schools in West Virginia. The researcher sought to understand the leadership behaviors that promote or obstruct successful change adoption that ultimately influences student outcomes. The intent of the comprehensive literature review allowed the researcher to create alignment to the research problem, purpose, and research questions being posed in the study. The researcher gathered information that would help address how distributed leadership shares responsibility, accountability, and authority across the team by empowering those with the knowledge, skills, and expertise to participate in key decisions that influence the organization's overall strategy and goals. The supporting materials and literature review articles included at least 150 peer-reviewed academic journal references, with 75% of the articles being published within the past five years. The limitation on the publication date helped ensure that the research articles used provided relevant and timely research for the study. The scholarly academic journal articles were obtained exclusively through Liberty University's Jerry Falwell online library using the specified filter criteria to identify only peer-reviewed sources.

This research study included participants at West Liberty University in the northern panhandle of West Virginia. The study included both faculty and staff administration employed full-time at West Liberty University for a minimum of one year. The combination of employment history and time at West Liberty University provided these individuals the experience necessary to relate their individual experiences and perceptions to me. The individuals selected through the participation criteria helped determine who were uniquely qualified to convey their relevant experiences pertaining to distributed leadership by answering the research questions outlined in Appendix A. The researcher did not define any further limiting demographics such as race, gender, age, or ethnicity. The researcher did not have any additional information outside of West Liberty University's public directory when selecting potential participants. The directory only included basic information limited to name, department, location, email, and phone number. Research participants were invited to participate using a streamlined approach that involved individually emailing potential research participants listed in the online directory. The researcher emailed every person in the directory with a personalized invitation to participate. The email invitation was approved by West Liberty University's Institutional Review Board. The invitation outlined the general overview of the study, the time requirements, participation criteria, and the consent requirements. The decision for a participant to participate in this qualitative research study was completely voluntary. The researcher electronically sent a consent form and included the wording of a similar format in the invitation to potential participants for their consideration. Participants who wanted to fill out the written survey questions in Appendix B were provided the questions and consent form to return to the researcher at their convenience. They were instructed to follow up with the researcher to clarify questions if applicable. If a participant requested a virtual interview, we scheduled a mutually

convenient time for a Microsoft Team's meeting interview. The researcher used a combination of purposeful and convenience sampling. The researcher used purposeful sampling to select West Liberty University as the population and convenience sampling to allow the research participants to volunteer. During the virtual interview, the researcher obtained consent verbally. Additionally, the researcher reiterated the strict confidentiality of responses and the private storage of the recordings and transcripts.

The target population for this study included 278 potential participants. The sample size for this qualitative case study was 20 of West Liberty's faculty and staff administration members who were qualified and agreed to participate. The researcher reviewed options for different sampling techniques; it was determined that purposeful sampling by selecting a four-year public higher education institution where the researcher did not know any of the potential participants was the most appropriate selection. The selection was further refined by convenience sampling, which allowed the researcher to reach out to potential participants who were more accessible. The collection process involved emailing everyone in the target population and allowing potential participants to identify themselves. A structured interview guide and internal documentation of notes were the primary methods for collecting data. These individual interviews were conducted solely between the researcher and each of the 20 participants. Participants responded to a series of open-ended questions. Each question from the interview guide was asked in sequential order so that the interview process remained consistent for each participant. The interview protocol consisted of an agreement for consent, a reminder that the interview was recorded, informing the participants about their privacy, and asking the interview questions. This qualitative case study took place between December 2021 and January 2022. The process took approximately eight weeks to email participants, track responses, schedule

interviews, and provide participants the opportunity to complete the written survey in Appendix B. Due to the timing of the academic calendar, holidays, the pandemic, and time commitment of university employees during the ending and beginning of terms, I had to consider possible limitations in participant availability. Additionally, West Liberty University had some recent political turmoil at the executive level. Dr. Grecco of West Liberty's IRB mentioned that participants could be less available or less inclined to participate in the study due to that event. I was approved to conduct my research at the beginning of December 2021. I was able to stay aligned with the timeline I had created to email potential participants throughout December and into early January. During the first two weeks of December and the first week of January, the researcher met the individual requirement of emailing all 278 potential participants personally. Research participants were being emailed, and the researcher was conducting interviews simultaneously. The researcher collected a small set of data early by the second week of December. The holiday, end of term, and West Liberty University's closure of the last week of the year limited responses during the last two weeks of the month. I emailed participants again at the beginning of January as faculty and staff returned to work. I had much more success with response rates during that time, so most of the data collection occurred throughout January 2022. The data analysis was completed by week 8, and research findings were written and finalized between weeks 8 and 10.

The most frequently used data collection method in qualitative research is interviews; interviews are a method in which the researcher asks the participant questions (Moser & Korstjens, 2017; 2018). I utilized the interview guide with each participant involved in a virtual interview. This ensured that the questions asked were consistent and followed similar patterns for each interview. I utilized deductive coding of descriptive statements to aid in theme

identification. Deductive coding aims to narrow the focal point by classifying a pre-defined list of codes aligned with the conceptual framework before collecting data (Skjott Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). This list allowed the researcher some flexibility by asking follow-up questions and reviewing videos and transcripts. I created codes that aligned to the research questions and used those codes to describe the participant responses by highlighting phrases and sentences within the interview transcript. This process allowed the researcher to establish patterns by assembling highlighted phrases and sentences from interviews with different participants to create a systematic overview of repetitions in the data collected. After the patterns were identified, I started identifying what themes were present in the data. I organized the themes based on alignment to the research questions, giving higher importance to codes relevant to the research topics and less importance to codes not aligned to the research topics. Those less important codes were identified as further recommendations for topics that could be studied in the future.

The researcher reviewed the recorded video transcript files to the written transcript's accuracy. The transcripts were manually modified to match the recordings' spoken words, as the written transcription service was not completely accurate when capturing the wording. The written transcripts were then coded manually using a color-coding system to identify and group common themes by highlighting the sections of the transcript to match. The research questions were the foundation used to create the color-coding system. The researcher maintained strict confidentiality, as promised to participants, by assigning participants pseudonyms. The researcher utilized a numbering system to assign each participant a code from P1 through P23. The researcher used the deductive coding approach to analyze the data. The researcher aligned the research problem to the existing literature on the subject to identify emergent themes and

then group the information collected from participants into those themes. Using this process, the researcher identified themes from the literature and then coded each participant's transcript into the identified themes. The themes were then analyzed, categorized, and grouped according to the research questions. Identifying themes and then categorizing responses was advantageous for the researcher due to inexperience in the coding process. The use of inductive coding allowed the researcher to analyze the data to better understand the participants' experiences.

Presentation of the Findings

This research study began with a thorough exploration of distributed leadership in higher education. The researcher conducted a comprehensive investigation of the academic literature related to distributed leadership's impact on higher education institutions. This analysis explored the predominant issues facing higher education at public four-year schools in West Virginia to understand the leadership behaviors that promote or obstruct successful change adoption that impact student outcomes. The intent of the comprehensive literature review allowed the researcher to create alignment to the research problem, purpose, and research questions being posed in the study. The researcher gathered information that would help address how distributed leadership shares responsibility, accountability, and authority across the team by empowering those with the knowledge, skills, and expertise to participate in key decisions that influence the organization's overall strategy and goals. The supporting materials and literature review articles included at least 150 peer-reviewed academic journal references, with 75% of the articles being published within the last five years. The limitation on the publication date helps to ensure that the research articles used provided relevant and timely research for the study. The scholarly academic journal articles were obtained exclusively through Liberty University's Jerry Falwell online library using the specified filter criteria to identify only peer-reviewed sources.

Overview of Themes Discovered

The researcher was able to identify six predominant themes at the conclusion of thematic analysis of this study. The themes identified by the researcher in the data offer alignment with the academic literature, research questions, and conceptual framework for this study. The themes identified below are the results of this qualitative case study depicting the perceptions of distributed leadership for the 20 West Liberty University faculty and staff administration involved in this study.

1. Training and professional development are essential for creating leaders throughout the organizational hierarchy.
2. Challenges facing the higher education industry are related to reduced budgets, declining enrollment populations, and the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.
3. Leadership behaviors directly contribute to successful change adoption, collaboration, student experience, and culture.
4. Leaders must balance competing and often conflicting demands that can alter the perceptions of the organizational culture and student experience.
5. The absence of distributed leadership negatively effects leadership practices related to empowerment, formal organization, culture, and information sharing.
6. The hierarchical organization and the company culture dictate the speed at which changes are accepted and adopted into the organization.

Discussion of Themes

The emergent themes from this study included training and development, challenges facing higher education, leadership behaviors, conflicting demands on administration, absence of distributed leadership negative effects, and culture impacting the speed of change. The research

study findings are reflected in the emergent theme categories below. The participants in the study frequently mentioned terms associated with participative theory, including shared decision-making, empowerment, authority, communication, and shared values or goals.

Emergent Theme 1: Leadership Training and Development

Quality leadership is the key for any organization to prosper, higher education included. The researcher found during the interviews that a broad and disparate level of leadership knowledge, training, and opportunity existed among the various participants. Their individual professional experiences affected their views and approaches to leadership. Research participants indicated their time in the position, various paid and voluntary experiences, and their role within the institution shaped their approach. All participants indicated that West Liberty University did not have a formal leadership program. Some participants, P6, P12, P13, P20, had extensive leadership training and development, while others, P2, P3, and P12 had very little to none. Those that had leadership training and development obtained those skills through other places of employment or through academia. Interestingly, there were conflicting responses to the questions pertaining to the institution's approach to professional development. Some of the participants, P5, P13, P15, and P17 had a positive take on whether they felt they were being encouraged to take on professional development opportunities. In contrast, P1, P2, P11, and P12 had the exact opposite response suggesting that they were not encouraged to take on professional development. Participant 13 indicated that their supervisor recognized the need for individuals to be ready to take on additional roles and responsibilities as people enter and leave the institution. This finding aligns to Vuori's (2019) argument suggesting the reason for higher education's hesitance to examine distributed leadership lies in several inherent challenges that make the application of distributed leadership complex. Among these challenges were different missions, diverse

leadership roles, communication challenges, and a disconnect between academic values and identity issues. Participant 15 exuberantly stated:

I love my dean and she is all about making sure that we actually have professional development days within our college. Every month we have some sort of a professional development topics, so she really does try to encourage us to seek out opportunities whether it be within our field of study or just professionalism in general. She does try to, you know, really encouraged us or even bringing opportunities to the university for us to be better.

Participant 2 reluctantly stated:

There's very little push for professional development as the first thing. Secondly, there's very little room for growth. A lot of times, and I always use the term lifers for people that are in these administrative roles that you know they're at the top, but they're not going anywhere. Because I mean, in all honesty, it's a cushy position, and it's easy to keep going until retirement. So unfortunately, I think there's a lack of professional development and a lack of promotion that ends up happening to younger employees, especially within our institution. But I think that exists in a lot of higher education institutions throughout the state. There are no formal mentorship programs here and we have had things in the past that were attempted but fizzled out. I never get anything from my supervisor that I'm under to say, hey, here's the opportunity to do this and this, and you know, kind of move up, that doesn't really happen.

According to the data obtained through interview transcripts, survey questions, and the researcher's notes, leadership and development opportunities often occurred through informal means and varied by department. There was a lack of formal training or mentoring, which forced

participants to obtain professional development independently or through a mentoring relationship they created. P5, P9, P17, and P19 all described personal mentors within their department who helped them gain new skills. Participant 6 stated, "Every year I put a little bit of money into my budget for professional development and what ends up happening is the money is not a problem, I don't have time."

I found that personal experiences with a supervisor or close colleague affected their view of leadership and mentoring approaches for many participants. Research participants often spoke about individualized experiences with someone that helped or hurt their development. Participant 1 stated:

The more we say yes, the more we are asked to do. No one has guided us, we restructured recently, the hierarchy, we're still hiring a provost, we just hired a president. No one was there to hold our hands, we had to take control, we had weekly dumpster fires for a while. We got really used to things falling apart and finding creative solutions to fix things, that made us competent, more confident in what we needed to do.

Interestingly, P2, P14, P17, P18, and P20 commented that one area they would change within the organization is a more formal leadership training or mentorship program. An et al. (2019) posited that leadership training could change leader behavior in the public sector. Participant 14 stated:

I think it's expanding and institutionalizing something because leadership changes, initiatives change, but institutionalizing things like leadership, development programs, professional development programs. Funding those things, and even if then it's the VP's prerogative of where they identify that need is empowering. Those people in those roles to make those potentially difficult decisions, grow and cultivate effective and efficient

leaders within your organization and they feel valued for their effort. Then they will continue to be effective and efficient leaders for you.

Participant 18 reiterated a similar sentiment to that of participant 14 by suggesting they need to do better, in offering training and development. Participant 18 posited that training could provide opportunities that promote knowledge and communication to make better decisions in the organization. Participant 14 further elaborated by suggesting that training, specifically hands-on, was lacking. P14 felt a lot of times people are just thrown into positions and not taught the skills they need to succeed in decision-making. Ironically, Participant 13 responded with an email immediately following our virtual interview to provide an update. This participant indicated that the Human Resources Department Director emailed the campus employees to inform them of an upcoming formal professional development opportunity.

Emergent Theme 2: Challenges Facing Higher Education

These days higher education as an industry is juggling more stressors, difficulties, and challenges than ever before. The COVID-19 pandemic has forced many brick and mortar schools to quickly pivot by shifting to online and hybrid modality classes at a moment's notice. These organizations were facing dwindling high school graduate numbers that led to lower industry enrollment numbers. These institutions continually face concerns around financial solvency as the state slashes budgets. Budget cuts also affect problems around racism and discrimination that require funding for diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives to combat. The recent literature on challenges facing higher education reiterated that the situation is complex. Administrators need to deliver results, and faculty need to teach; however, there are limited resources. With so many leaders in higher education, the situation can get very complex regarding leadership and strategic goals (Pearce et al., 2018). Institutions can only hope to tackle these challenges with a clear

vision of the future, a resilient culture, and the ability to support students and employees in this demanding environment. It also requires ambitious, bold, proactive, and positive leadership throughout the institution. Regrettably, institutions and their leaders are not giving enough time or attention to their staff to develop leadership capabilities, making it even more difficult to navigate this challenging industry.

During the interviews, the researcher found challenges facing the higher education industry in West Virginia's four-year public institutions stem from a few main areas. In part, this is due to dwindling budgets, lower enrollment numbers caused by declining populations in West Virginia, and the effect the pandemic has on higher education. Every participant touched on either the topic of budget or the pandemic during the interviews. Participants P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P8, P9, P10, P11, P13, P14, P16, P18, P19, and P20 all referenced budgetary concerns as a major challenge facing higher education. The overwhelming recurrence of budgetary concerns provided triangulation to support the reliability and legitimacy of this finding. Source triangulation resulted from the interviews generated with different participants at different times, which contributed to convergent validity or enhanced confidence (Farquhar et al., 2020). The fact that participants' employment ranges varied, and all participants touched on one or both topics support the confidence of this finding. This finding aligned with Jones and Harvey (2017), they suggested that higher education operates in an increasingly complex environment, placing it under substantial stress and increasing the likelihood of conflict. They forewarned the need for a more dynamic and broader approach to leadership. P4 summed it up by stating, "The biggest troubles with leadership that we have probably is with funding and lack of training and leadership in general." P4 continued:

There are some major factors, the pandemic, the enrollment cliff that people talk about happening over the next few years, that are some major things that haven't occurred to the population of people going to higher education since the proliferation of higher education in 50s and 60s. Those are some major challenges that everybody is kind of facing right now and at all levels.

Additionally, P5 touched on the pandemic by stating:

We think obviously COVID-19 has been a huge challenge for everyone right now. You know we're getting ready to open back up and we're dealing with the testing. And then just dealing with the different mindsets on it, spending money on things that we weren't planning to spend originally. I think as far as just burnout within the staff, we've been doing this for almost two years, and everybody is starting to just wear down. Plus, we're not using our human capital on the jobs that were set here to do.

P5 also described the declining population:

I think that's probably specific to West Virginia but there is a declining population of those high school students, so over the next 5-10 years that pool we pull from will shrink. The value, the perceived value of education has changed. Why wouldn't I not want to do that and start a career where I'm going to make money and then you get into some of the oil and gas and things like that where they can make even more. And it's well why do I need to go and put myself in debt when I can make all this money. It's changed the perceived value I think also for those of us in higher education institutions. I think those three things are really, that's what you hear us talk about most when it comes to enrollment and challenges that we're facing. It's the perceived value, COVID-19, and the population.

The only way to successfully navigate a rapidly changing and complex environment such as higher education is to ensure the institution has vision and resilience. Participant 13 summed it by stating:

We say the right things and we can plan and dream, but at the end of the day, something realistically just cannot be executed without budget. Our intentions are pretty much there, but we can't physically make them happen all the time.

If the organization has strong leaders within the ranks of the faculty and staff employed at the institution, they will be more likely to weather moments of crisis more effectively. Developing the next generation of leaders requires the institution to identify leadership potential in the staff and faculty members employed at the university. The institution can be more flexible in navigating change and better positioned to take advantage of new opportunities if it can address these challenges more succinctly. These opportunities can also provide growth and improve value for those currently working and attending the institution.

Emergent Theme 3: Leadership Behaviors

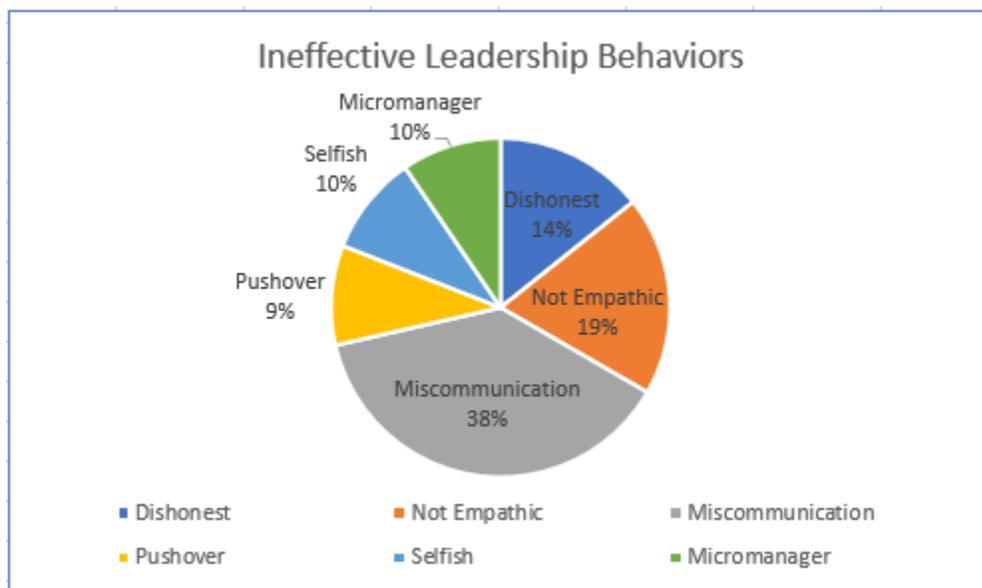
Cultivating leadership behaviors and characteristics are essential skillsets for institutions to succeed in the current higher education environment. Distributed leadership is not designed to be a substitute or a replacement option for individual leadership abilities; rather, it is intended to be an essential complement that enables and facilitates the leadership abilities of specific individuals throughout the organization. Unfortunately, little has been researched about the need to develop quality or desired leadership behaviors among faculty and staff; even less has been written about the segmented group of West Virginia four-year public institutions. Institutions must begin taking an active role in preparing their employees to learn and model desirable leadership behaviors. Leadership behaviors provide the institution with a pool of talent that can

provide resources as a prudent approach. It empowers employees to become active participants in their own learning and development, enhances diversity and inclusion for underrepresented groups, and helps employees maintain a sense of awareness as role models and mentors for colleagues and students.

Many participants believe their personal experiences, both good and bad, helped shape their expected or desired leadership styles and behaviors. Participants often described a personal experience with a supervisor when comparing leaders' good and bad attributes, characteristics, and behaviors. Many participants described an atmosphere of empathy, trust, transparency, loyalty, inclusion, collaboration, and communication as the type of leadership they find desirable. A recurring topic, communication, was brought up by P2, P3, P4, P8, P9, P10, P11, P12, P13, P14, P17, P19, and P20. The participants used descriptive words such as good communicator, transparent, good listener, provides quality feedback; alternatively, the topic of miscommunication, lack of transparency, and dishonesty were described as the problem. Participant 6 described fairness and reasonable as attributes of a good leader. The researcher found that participants also described empathetic leaders as desirable, such as P2 and P3, P1 described a good leader as a compassionate leader. P5 described supportive leadership, P15 noted they put people first, P20 stated they believe in people, P16 and P17 used the word caring. The generalizations describe a leader who is more than just a boss, but a person who shows genuine interest in their subordinates and colleagues. Participant 9 stated, "Clear communication, everyone has to know the objective, and be able to have a clear understanding of the mission, so everyone is on board, going toward the same goal." A visual representation of the data is below.

Figure 2:*Positive Leadership Behaviors*

Note. Positive behaviors expressed in percentages.

Figure 3:*Ineffective Leadership Behaviors*

Note. Ineffective behaviors expressed in percentages.

Participant 16 stated:

A leader is that person who people want to follow. They want to follow them because they understand that they care about them. It has a lot to do with things that are unrelated to the job. Good leadership is developed over the course of time with trust and knowing that you have their best interests in mind and things of that nature. I have this same approach even in my classroom. I have bunch of students, and characteristically, every Monday we talk about what they did over the weekend.

Leadership behaviors have a definitive impact on morale and the organization's performance. Leadership skills are not a tangible asset or skill that the organization can physically count. It is a fair assessment to say that while leaders can be born with a specific leadership aptitude, it is important to note that anyone can learn vital skills that help to improve their leadership skills. The organization must focus on providing opportunities for employees to practice self-awareness and attend training. Leaders are considered authentic when they engage in behaviors such as self-awareness, relational transparency, balanced processing of information, and internalized moral perspective (Koohang et al., 2017). The institution can boost the impact on performance and morale by helping those within the leadership role by improving their skills and behaviors in these areas. The indicators of organizational performance are well documented in the literature: monetary, employee and customer satisfaction, development and growth, information technology, human resources, reliability, quality of work-life, and innovation (Koohang et al., 2017). This improvement can positively influence the team or department, providing a real tangible performance.

Emergent Theme 4: Conflicting Demands

Higher education administration must efficiently and effectively handle situations in which the institution is torn between important populations with competing demands. The researcher identified themes pertaining to conflicting demands in various degrees throughout this study. For example, participants' topics described administration versus staff, employees versus students, administrative projects versus student experience projects, private versus public partnerships, and performance versus work-life balance. The researcher investigated how these conflicting demands were interpreted by asking how those employed in higher education prioritize between different interests in situations characterized by the lack of defined expectations or solutions. The challenges varied as traditions, cultures, and distinct ways of conducting teaching represent substantial hurdles for educational leaders with a focus and ambition for stimulating change (Stensaker et al., 2018;2020).

Participant 8 explained, for example, "Doing what's right and being objective that you can really look at the situation for what's best for the students and not personally what's best for you, because you can't in that leadership role." The same participant further elaborated that enhancing student experience was a way to encourage students to stay on campus. However, this directive conflicted with work-life balance. Participant 8 explained that the university is utilizing options such as offering later library hours and campus tours on Saturdays to benefit students. Previously, the university was a Monday through Friday, 8am to 4pm operation, and then the university shut down. In higher education, especially in West Virginia, school leaders try to appeal to student experience outcomes to maintain enrollment. There exists this conflicting demand between two important groups. Participant 2 offered observations regarding the conflicting demands of programs and budget allocations. Participant 2 stated:

I know we numbers driven when it comes to budget, as to where does the money get allocated. For instance, our College of Sciences is our largest college and they're doing great, and they're growing because we are living in a world where science programs are hot right now, and everybody wants that. Our College of Sciences has been getting a lot of money shuffled into their direction, and rightfully so. I will say one of the things that I find concerning is when certain programs are declining. I think they need to look at it and say are we not pushing enough budgetarily into this? Or is it just this is the trend you know worldwide, or do these programs need to go away?

Participant 4 summed up the conflicting demands by stating:

Higher education has to create enriching programs that attract prospective students, support enrollment, find exterior funding opportunities, private versus public partnerships. How do we figure out how to do this and who are we supposed to ask for this money?

Disagreement within higher education as an industry is something that will always exist and might become more recurrent as institutions struggle to resolve complex challenges such as new income sources. Internal conflict can be detrimental to the morale of the university for employees and students; this conflict can damage the standing of the university in its community. The answer was to find ways of reconciling academic and leadership values that remove ambiguity by aligning all decisions to the mission of the university. Participant 11 asked a question regarding how small institutions broaden their approach. Participant 11 asked, "Do we broaden what we're doing? Or are we somehow you know, losing, losing a sense of whatever our mission is? Resolving those questions and then have administrators who will help resolve those questions."

A critical part of sustaining an organization's alignment to its mission is to create a framework that is supported by processes that are both consistent and intentional. Participants 4, 5, 8, 14, and 20 all described a disconnect using various analogies. Participant 4 said, "If everybody has a bucket to help bail out the boat, things go forward. When that's not happening, or when we're not giving folks the resources or the agency to be able to affect change, you know the boat sinks very quickly." This framework allowed employees to have a clear sense of direction that centers on the mission and vision of the institution that ensures priorities are well understood by everyone in all levels of the organization. Leaders need to help employees identify ways to support efforts to fulfill the mission. Leadership provides a clear picture, so everyone understands what the mission is in its ideal state. If the organization can create the mission and vision at the organizational level, the institution will benefit from also having a common language across teams. This common language reinforces how the entire organization works collectively to achieve its purpose. The leaders must be diligent in reinforcing how teams function across different departments and utilize the mission while conducting their work. This approach reiterates how the team can make great things happen when everyone works toward the same mission.

Emergent Theme 5: Absence of Distributed Leadership

Recent research on organizational dynamics has indicated that teams in which leadership is shared, can be very effective. The distributed leadership model demonstrates that shared leadership leads to better organizational performance. Unfortunately, many organizations remain hierarchical as the practice of sharing the problems and privileges of leadership is far from straightforward. This research helped the investigator consider how distributed leadership can be exercised in numerous ways. These relationships exist in various contexts, including the

relationship a leader has with themselves, those below and above them, and colleagues in similar roles. The absence of distributed leadership can be detrimental to the organization. Without strong leadership, employees can struggle with performance, lack accountability, become dependent on their boss for decision-making, and resist change.

There is no evidence of a universal model for leadership; however, distributed leadership offers significant benefits. When the researcher asked participants for examples of how leadership is distributed, some participants described the delegation of systems and processes that include decision-making into lower levels of the organization. Alternatively, some participants described the strict control of those same systems and processes by describing situations in which they felt disempowered and were avoided altogether during the decision-making process.

Recent research into higher education highlights how leadership can be created through the widespread distribution of responsibility to those in the organization with the skills or expertise to take on leadership roles. It is necessary to understand and appreciate the purpose of a distributed leadership perspective. To fully appreciate and recognize social, political, and power relations within the organization, leaders must realize there is a constant need for experimentation. Leadership is often centered on power and authority; the meaning and purposes of leadership must be clarified. A leader's influence is unavoidably linked to the contribution of others, both in the level and empowerment related to that influence. The findings suggested that leadership is extended over the social and situational contexts within the institution.

Interestingly, this research study uncovered conflicting answers about whether employees feel empowered to take on more of a leadership role during discussions or simply if they feel empowered to speak up about matters affecting the institution. Participant 4 impactfully stated:

The goal of higher education in any form, is to create creative problem solvers that go out into the workforce and make the world better. At all times, change times, stable times. I think the challenge right now is that there are a lot of leaders of higher education and those in all levels of leadership in higher education matrixes, that are resistant to creative thinking and creative problem-solving populations that might exist there.

Participant 17 stated:

Even if we really didn't like each other or something, we or did like each other, we feel close enough [within the department] to say those things. But once you get a little bit broader, I don't think anyone would feel uncomfortable speaking their mind.

Alternatively, Participant 9 noted:

Depends on what you are, tenure is more vocal, if you do say something retaliation is an option since we are not unionized, so something can happen to you. Some faculty don't want to speak up because of retribution like taking away a position, or certain things they can do to change their life. It depends upon setting, small versus large, regardless of personality. Every college is different, leadership, how it's ran, so I can't speak to all colleges. In my college, people do share their insights, but I don't know if they would take it to the larger group.

Power was a topic that many participants were not able to discuss in detail. The topic of how power is gained, sustained, used, and misused was worth exploring in the distributed leadership model. The traditional definitions of power must be explored for distributed leadership to work. How leaders utilize their power to accomplish mission objectives has a critical bearing on an organization. Some participants mentioned power-hungry as a negative attribute and perceived this trait as bad. However, leaders that leverage their power to implement

change can ultimately become successful leaders. Leaders must use some level of power. Without power, leaders would find it difficult to drive results to improve behaviors and outcomes. Distributed leadership techniques have proven to be effective across a wide range of industries. It is through involving more people in the decision-making process that leads to better outcomes. This form of strategic leadership helps everyone feel included and assists leaders with decision-making who are unaware of biases that impact their thinking. Shared leadership provides for an environment that promotes accountability but allows for flexibility for results a person or group has no control over.

Distributed leadership increases loyalty that creates positive relationships; employees feel empowered and trusted. When leaders fail to solicit others' opinions through shared leadership, it makes employees feel like they are not valued members of a team. Leaders who are willing to admit they don't know everything are likely to involve others in the decision-making process; that involvement prepares individuals for similar roles. Succession planning is important and can be accomplished by entrusting employees with the power to make decisions that can also affect them. In this capacity, leaders can serve in a mentor role that prepares candidates for their future roles as leaders. If an organization does not plan for future leaders, they miss an opportunity to retain knowledge and quality employees who want to advance the organization.

Emergent Theme 6: Culture Affects Change

The most direct connection between organizational culture and organizational change is the organization's flexibility. Organizations that are always on the lookout for ways to improve efficiencies remain innovative. Higher education has been considered somewhat of a slow mover when adopting change. The more traditional organizations prefer to operate their business as they always have, regardless of marketplace changes. Higher education has long been undeterred by

changing consumer demands. However, with the changing academic landscape, declining populations, perceived value concerns, and alternative career paths, the industry must become innovative if it hopes to remain financially solvent. Participant 14 summarized the sentiment of higher education in West Virginia needing the vision to see the whole picture; the day is today, but we need to focus on the bigger picture.

The underlying theme for every interview conducted described the goal of higher education, simply put, is to develop the next generation of inspired and competent problem solvers to find careers where they can utilize their talents to positively impact their communities. The issue arises when these institutions do not have an opportunity to educate tomorrow's leaders. Participants consistently touched on dwindling numbers and retention issues throughout the interview process, as outlined in emergent theme one. It is no longer enough to just get students in the door; the greater issue at hand is the ability to attract students to the institution and retain them throughout their educational journey. Higher education institutions, specifically four-year public schools in West Virginia, must ask themselves what they can change to aid in retention by improving student outcomes. Participant 14 passionately explained:

Everything you do has an impact, positive, negative or neutral to a student in what they're considering moving forward, whether it's with their academic program, whatever it may be. If you have a positive experience, have a positive impact on somebody and they continue in their degree, I say you are helping them work towards further achieving the career path that they've set forth for themselves, right? So that's really what it comes down to. I mean that, if you're not earning a degree to look towards the career opportunities then why are you even here?

The first step toward improving retention is to work on improving student outcomes. The root of the institution's ability to adopt changes that positively impact students is through the organization's culture. An influential and engrained culture shelters the organization from the changing environment by protecting its values and creating a stable organization that has a better opportunity for long-term survival. An organization with a well-established culture can adapt quickly to environmental changes or be persistent in resisting missteps that are detrimental to organizations with an immature culture. The relationship that exists between the culture and the overall performance of an organization is delineated by the functions of the culture. An ingrained culture enforces group cohesion, improves the way the organization adapts, increases loyalty, and supports the commitment to the organization.

This research aimed to explore ways to improve student outcomes through distributed leadership. The recurring theme of adopting change included leadership development conversations, which brings the conversation back to the beginning. The opportunity to openly discuss leadership got participants thinking about their own personal leadership qualities. They further reflected on leadership within the organization and whether those with the skills were given the opportunity to take on responsibility and leadership roles lower in the hierarchy. Participants often described culture by incorporating statements related to leadership, atmosphere, pressures, processes, and budgets. Participant 20 stated:

You got me thinking about having a mentoring something, something that gets, you know, put forth to the Department of Education down in Charleston. I think that the HEPC has some connections to target annual things like training. Even if they're great leaders, want to come here, and that's another one of the problems too is they get to choose from so many positions and schools. Those people who are here and do enjoy the

state and work on building leaders. If you want to we can push together on something like that to make it happen, I would be glad to participate or put my port two cents in or even drive down to Charleston.

Participant 17 highlighted:

After talking to you about this, I'm thinking to myself. I want to go to someone at the school and say what other kind of leadership training is there, or what can I do? Or can we get in here because I haven't really thought about it until now.

Employers who set an example of distributed leadership within their organizations must intentionally improve managers' capabilities to get results by utilizing delegation and teamwork. As globalization creates a more complex environment, companies must look to adopt distributed leadership models. These models focus on less centralized power. Leaders in the organization know that high-performing employees prefer to work in an environment that promotes shared decision-making, autonomy, and trust to do their jobs to their best abilities.

The public four-year higher education institutions have been subject to calls for a shift from a traditional control model of governance towards an inclusive style such as distributed leadership, according to Joslyn (2018). Vuori (2019) argued that the higher education industry's reluctance to explore distributed leadership as a viable inclusive governance style lies in the inherent challenges that make distributed leadership complex. These challenges consist of different missions, diverse roles, communication challenges, and academic values. Institutions must adjust to the changing educational marketplace by adopting models that fit their specific demographic and needs. The leaders of these public universities, and more importantly in West Virginia, must have real and difficult conversations with themselves, organizational leadership, employees, students, and community members as they reimagine leadership in this new age. The

intent of this qualitative case study was to better understand and explore the specific problem to be addressed. The possible lack of distributed leadership in academic organizations creates disparate hierarchical groups within higher education institutions in West Virginia, resulting in the potential inability of academic institutions to successfully implement changes that improve student outcomes. The research findings provided valuable insight into the foundational elements necessary for leaders of public four-year institutions in West Virginia to consider as they respond to the complex and ever-changing demands of the current educational climate. As academia is at the forefront of helping students learn to be critical problem solvers, these institutions are distinctively positioned to supply our communities with the future leaders of tomorrow. These institutions have the capabilities to actively respond to the challenges described by many of the participants associated with budgets, enrollment, diversity and inclusion, technology, perceived value, and COVID-19. Additionally, these higher education institutions must undertake the necessary and difficult task of exploring their culture to determine what works and what does not work for their institution. A one size fits all approach does not work in this environment. Leadership must adopt distributed leadership models to implement change adoption successfully. Leaders of the institution should understand their behaviors influence those lower within the organization. As a result, they need to be exemplary in displaying the behaviors and characteristics they want to reflect throughout the entire organization. A lack of diversity and individuals who are not empowered to become leaders in some capacities impedes successful organizations because they inhibit change adoption. It is important to note that changing a culture does not happen overnight. Changing a culture takes determination, tenacity, and a steadfast approach to focusing on making small, impactful improvements over time. The

consistent application of thoughtful and intentional acts can make a permanent difference in the outcomes for students, the next generation of leaders.

Relationship of Findings to Research Questions

This section explored how each of the research questions correlates to the findings. The questions presented aim to explore leadership failure and then specifically examine attributes and behaviors that support the successful implementation of distributed leadership. The researcher utilized those findings to determine how student initiatives are different and use those differences to implement changes that positively affect students.

RQ 1: How do leaders fail to apply distributed leadership in higher education?

RQ 1A: What leadership attributes and behaviors contribute to the successful support of distributed leadership?

RQ 1B: What leadership attributes and behaviors contribute to the failure to support distributed leadership?

RQ 2: In what ways are student impacted initiatives different than other change initiatives in higher education?

RQ 2A: How do the differences impact the ability to implement change in higher education institutions?

RQ 3: What elements of distributed leadership are present in higher education that positions institutions for success in implementing changes to improve student outcomes?

The research questions informed the specific problem statement. The specific problem to be addressed was the possible lack of distributed leadership in academic organizations creating disparate hierarchical groups within higher education institutions in West Virginia. This resulted in academic institutions' inability to successfully implement changes that improve student

outcomes. Research question one sought to explore how leaders fail to apply distributed leadership in higher education. The sub-questions for research question one analyzed attributes and behaviors that contribute to the success and failure of distributed leadership. Research question two sought to determine how student impacted initiatives are different from other change initiatives in higher education. The sub-question for research question two explored how the differences between student impacted initiatives and other change initiatives influence the ability to implement change in higher education. Research question three sought to address what elements of distributed leadership were present in higher education that positions institutions for success in implementing changes to improve student outcomes.

Themes one and three were related to research question one, which aimed at identifying how leaders failed to apply distributed leadership. These themes focused on the attributes, characteristics, and behaviors that contribute or fail to contribute to distributed leadership. The findings overwhelmingly proposed a model of empathy, collaboration, effective communication, mission-oriented, motivating, and loyal leaders that grow other leaders. The ability of those individuals to recognize the attributes of leadership behaviors that contribute to the successful adaption of change initiatives such as a distributed leadership model in higher education is extraordinary. Although not prevalent, the behaviors contributing to the failure were just as important to explore in this context. The findings suggested that dishonesty, power-hungry, micromanaging, lack of communication, lack of empathy, and poor abilities to manage their team as apparent behaviors that prevent an institution from adopting distributed leadership behaviors. While academically capable, individuals in this environment are often not provided the formal learning necessary to navigate complex demands while improving their leadership abilities successfully. These professionals must often learn informally through observable or

personal experiences without a formal structure in place to support them. This model might provide some educational benefit, but it fails to intentionally develop the skills for those individuals to successfully balance demands while moving the institution forward towards achieving the institution's mission.

Themes two and four related to research question two; the findings suggested that challenges facing higher education and balancing conflicting demands impact change initiatives, especially the adoption of student-focused change initiatives. Leaders face a complex onslaught of challenges that require them to balance equally important but competing needs of various stakeholders. As a result, the decisions being made at the organization influence the perceptions of the organization, culture, and student experience. Identifying how student impacted initiatives are different and how those differences affect the ability to implement changes is critical for the organization to understand how to successfully introduce and gain support for changes that directly and indirectly impact students.

Themes five and six relate to research question three, which sought to identify what elements of distributed leadership were present in higher education that position institutions for success with implementing changes to improve student outcomes. The findings suggested the absence of distributed leadership as a negative leadership practice due to the lack of empowerment, how it impacts the formal organizational culture, and the lack of information sharing necessary for successfully implementing changes to improve student outcomes. Additionally, the findings suggested that company culture dictates how changes are accepted and adopted into an organization. Institutional leaders must be aware and actively work to improve the culture so that the institution may successfully adapt to these changes as they are encountering.

Relationship of Findings to Research Framework

The research framework delivered the underlying structure to support the researcher's effort. A research framework contains concepts that, when combined with their definitions and applications, help strengthen the study. The research framework diagram displays the various inputs and links the actors, concepts, constructs, and theories to the output. The research framework supports three kinds of justifications: the why or purpose of the study, the how of the study, and the what to help clearly illustrate the structure of the research plan (Cai et al., 2019). The concepts identified in the research framework include collaboration, improving organizational culture, and interaction to improve student outcomes. These concepts were described in various capacities by participants. Each of the participants described a collaborative situation at least once during their interview. Cultural awareness was discussed during each interview by allowing participants to describe their perception of the current environment and by offering them an opportunity to describe what distributed leadership changes they would make. Additionally, the research found participants described ways to improve student outcomes by building a more collaborative culture. As a result, the research framework identified participative theory. Participative management theory is one of the most effective management and leadership practices that describes the relationship between participative leadership and employee participation (Mohammed Shaed, 2018). The research supported participative theory by reviewing opportunities for those lower within the organization to take on responsibility and be more involved in the decision-making. The shared decision-making aspect reaffirms one of the basic associations of shared or distributed leadership, allowing those with the expertise to be involved in the decision-making process. The actors in this framework, leader and follower interaction, was explored through the discussion centered on perceived interactions between

leaders and followers within the organization. Many participants described how colleagues utilized rapport to build relationships rather than their title to influence power. Participant 22, for example, described how many individuals are collegial in interacting with other employees to build positive relationships. The constructs suggest a progression of effects beginning with leadership style influencing culture, the culture influencing decision-making, and decision-making ultimately impacting student outcomes. The research supported these constructs by identifying specific themes associated with each construct and concluding with the progression from leadership style or behaviors through improved student outcomes or experiences.

Relationship of Findings to Anticipated Themes

The following were the anticipated themes for the research. The anticipated themes included instructional practices, behavior, decision-making, leader-member exchange, emergent leadership identity, and manager effectiveness. The discovered themes included training and development, challenges facing higher education, leadership behaviors, conflicting demands on administration, absence of distributed leadership negative effects, and culture impacting the speed of change. The similarities between anticipated and discovered themes included behavior, decision-making, leader-member exchange, and leadership identity. The differences include instructional practices, manager effectiveness, and conflicting administration demands.

The researcher expected to find themes pertaining to the quality of teaching in higher education, but that theme failed to materialize during the research. The researcher also expected higher education faculty to focus on instructional practices to achieve improved student learning outcomes. Those student outcomes are the objective for higher education faculty members. The researcher anticipated high-impact teaching practices and innovative approaches as the most impactful teaching and curriculum strategies. Only Participant 11 brought up the curriculum but

only mentioned it in the context of a curriculum committee. The participant described internal debates when new programs come up and significant improvements to program revisions as part of the functionality of the curriculum committee.

Additionally, the researcher expected to find themes pertaining to manager effectiveness. The research anticipated some participants might focus more on the differences between a manager and a leader. Participant 16 made a remark to distinguish between a boss and a leader but none of the other participants elaborated on this anticipated theme any further. There was an opportunity for participants to explore managerial effectiveness by comparing that to leader behaviors. The researcher expected to identify themes through participant experience related to leaders whose skills involve motivating people. While viewed as task-oriented, managers are not necessarily leaders, but that viewpoint depends on the definition of leadership. A theme expected to be found in the research described how managers, regardless of leadership status, play pivotal roles in influencing the success or failure of an organization. Managers can also be leaders and can influence organizational strategies that improve effectiveness, exploit market opportunities, and neutralize potential threats (Anzengruber et al., 2017).

The researcher did not anticipate a theme pertaining to the conflicting administration demands. While the researcher was aware that demands existed, the researcher did not anticipate participants to cover that topic in depth. However, many participants touched on the conflicting administration demands during the interviews, especially when asked about higher education leadership challenges. In hindsight, it does make sense that while some of the participants were not in the administrator's group, they would still be aware of those challenges. Some participants gave specific examples of conflict, such as Participant 2 describing the introduction of private, public partnerships as a solution to funding shortfalls and competing interests.

A theme that was both anticipated and discovered was that of behavior. The researcher expected participants to describe leadership behavior in detail, and the participants described both positive and negative attributes. Often participants would provide not only specific characteristics but would mention someone. For example, Participant 15 enthusiastically described his boss as having excellent leadership behaviors, and every participant described at least one good and one ineffective quality. Capabilities describe behaviors that distinguish effective performers from ineffective ones by examining behaviors that include motives, beliefs, and values. Capabilities are representative of the tasks and activities used to accomplish a specific job (Anzengruber et al., 2017). The second anticipated and discovered theme was based on decision-making. Leaders must help others learn to navigate a complex and dynamic working environment by providing opportunities to promote decision-making. The art of good decision-making requires a person to be unbiased and use their skills in selecting options that achieve the best outcomes. Often this might include convincing others to a viewpoint or making an argument to support a tough decision. A good argument is well informed structurally, supported by truth, acceptable to a reasonable person, has sufficient grounds for the truth of the conclusion, and is an effective rebuttal to criticisms (Damer, 2013). The research in this study identified characteristics of distributed leadership that positively influence organizational decision-making processes for those individuals dispersed throughout the hierarchy. As the researcher explored further, an expected theme of finding out how factors such as personality traits, leadership styles, and culture contribute to the decision-making processes came to materialize. Distributed leadership challenges educational institutions' existing structures to allow employees to be more directly involved in planning and decision-making. This direct involvement contributes to higher levels

of commitment, improved morale, and a trusting relationship needed to improve innovation, job satisfaction, and corporate culture (Torlak et al., 2021).

Additionally, the researcher anticipated and discovered leader-member exchanges to be a theme of the study. Leadership influences commitment, motivation, and working conditions that directly affect student learning and achievement (Pietsch & Tulowitzki, 2017). The researcher discussed how transactional leadership exchanges work as leaders and followers negotiate costs and benefits based on their self-interests. The research participants often described interactions between individuals based on rapport, and participants described followers' willingness to be led through strong relationships founded on trust and empowerment.

Lastly, leadership identity was an anticipated and discovered theme. This theme was not immediately recognizable from a direct standpoint, but the identity piece was evident in the research after further analysis. Leadership identity management describes a process that allows leaders to rise naturally in the organization, and this process differs from traditionally selecting managers for these roles. Organizations that can focus on learning the traits of emergent leaders and align those individuals to achieve business objectives remain innovative. Participant 10 described how they started as a standard faculty member, to the chair of their department, and ultimately became a dean of their college. This progression provided an example of the institution selecting and developing an individual for a leadership identity. Understanding the process of creating a leadership identity is central to designing leadership programs and teaching leadership (McCain & Matkin, 2019).

Relationship of Findings to The Literature

The academic literature provided the structure to support the research study by providing the researcher with essential background information before delving into the research component

of the study. The literature identified leadership practices, including strategic planning, building new leaders, and team empowerment. The research identified and supported these same leadership practices as important components of leadership. Leaders handle changes brought about by new technologies, globalization, politics, and the environment; those changes transform followers' values, beliefs, and attitudes. Today's environments must include a strong, supported leadership development pipeline for the future. Therefore, identifying and selecting the best potential leaders are critical strategic objectives for ensuring a sustainable, competitive organization. Organizations struggle with identifying potential leaders. They question how to structure the assessments; by including information on performance, resume, determination, popularity, or any other criteria. Participant 14 articulated the impact of the goal of leadership was to grow and cultivate effective and efficient leaders within an organization, so they feel valued and become effective leaders for the organization. The organization's success depends on empowering the team to make decisions lower in the hierarchy. Leaders can accomplish this by helping professionals learn and develop leadership abilities to secure the organization's sustained success in the future.

Summary of the Findings

The research presented findings that were able to identify six predominant themes after this study. The themes identified by the researcher in the data offer alignment with the academic literature, research questions, and conceptual framework for this study. The researcher utilized established and accepted research methods, sampling procedures and conducted iterative interview questioning practices to create alignment with the academic literature. The use of an interview template provided open-ended questions to participants. The questions were selected as they offered the best option for the researcher to understand the experience of the research

participants as they experienced it. The researcher gathered both video and written transcripts. At the end of each interview, the researcher checked the transcript for any glaring discrepancies and adjusted it accordingly. The researcher then coded all the collected interview transcripts and survey questions to identify themes. This process of color-coding themes in each transcript allowed the researcher the opportunity to confirm and prioritize themes.

The findings presented during this qualitative case study specifically addressed the identified research problem pertaining to distributed leadership in West Virginia. The research filled a gap in the literature regarding how institutions implement distributed leadership to positively impact student outcomes at higher education institutions in West Virginia. This process was accomplished by conducting a literature review to understand what academic literature existed on the topic, then establishing a conceptual framework inspired by the academic literature. The researcher then developed questions to further examine the specific research problem in-depth and meaningfully. After conducting 20 interviews with employees at West Liberty University, I determined saturation had been successfully achieved. The participants were providing consistent answers and offering examples that had been identified by previous participants, as such there was no need to continue collecting more data. Additional data would not have provided any more relevant or new information to address the posed research questions. The key conclusions drawn from the findings described how professional development was essential for developing leaders throughout the hierarchy. The challenges facing higher education are complex, and to remain competitive, the organization must adopt new strategies to survive. Another key finding was how leaders must balance conflicting demands. Moreover, their behaviors can directly contribute to the organizational culture. This influence impacts change adoption, collaboration, and experiences. The research questions were

designed to determine what makes an institution successful at adopting distributed leadership, how those leadership behaviors impact the organization, and how that influences student outcomes. The organization can greatly benefit from distributed leadership practices to improve morale and culture. The right leadership behaviors are essential to creating a positive and encouraging workplace. The absence of shared leadership is determinantal to empowerment and knowledge transfer necessary to improve student outcomes.

Application to Professional Practice

The research findings of this qualitative case study directly contributed to the gap in the literature regarding the inability of higher education institutions to implement distributed leadership to improve student outcomes. This research project focused on findings related to four-year public higher education institutions in West Virginia. However, throughout the research, it became clear that the findings of this research can relate to the professional practice of higher education institutions. Leadership and employees of higher education may likely benefit from the results of this study as it relates to adopting distributed leadership models to successfully implement changes that improve student outcomes. This research project provided a dialog and an opportunity for higher education leadership to focus on sharing responsibilities to lower levels in the hierarchy. Furthermore, this study challenged leaders to develop their staff with the skills they need to succeed and improve the overall culture to support students. Higher education leadership is directly responsible for empowering their employees to create innovative approaches to develop students as future leaders in our communities. Leadership must address resource limitations, student outcomes, changing culture, and complex organizational demands to transform higher education if they hope to remain sustainable.

Improving General Leadership Practice

Leadership development is a discipline distinct from traditional leadership studies and seeks to determine the support and development needed for effective leadership (Luria et al., 2019). Generally, improving leadership practice is essential to improving a business. A position or title does not define leadership; leadership is a person's level of influence that inspires others to follow an organization's vision, mission, and values. Leaders constantly deal with changes due to advancing technologies, globalization, politics, environment, regulations, and consumer demand that require leaders to positively impact followers to transform the culture that shapes the organization's values, beliefs, and attitudes.

This study focused on higher education and the industry leaders but could apply to any industry. Leaders must actively be aware of the culture and its impact on the business. Educational leaders are tasked with balancing academic pursuits and business demands to create competent graduates capable of leading organizations. These institutions, for many years, have gotten by on a top-down approach to leadership. However, as the industry changes, we must look for ways to change or risk doors closing. This top-down leadership style marks the end of one era in many ways but creates an opportunity to move into a new era. This new era of leadership is created in a culture that promotes sharing responsibility, empowering individuals to speak up, and providing those with the expertise an opportunity to take on leadership roles. The combination of cultural elements creates commitment to an organization, provides growth, and develops a clear strategy that aligns with the mission. Higher education institutions must better understand their organizational culture, morale, the need for professional development, and transparency to adopt lasting change that benefits students.

Leaders in today's environment must be knowledgeable in business practices that help them address the industry's challenges. Businesses that stay idle or ignore the need for change will undoubtedly become obsolete; it is no longer sufficient to do things the way they have always been done. Specifically, the higher education industry has been on the receiving end of this volatile environment. Consumers' demands are changing, regulations are shifting, and the value of education is fluctuating as the economy adjusts to this post-pandemic environment. As a result, the industry has undergone a change in demographics and the unyielding pressure to prioritize customer satisfaction.

Although the higher education industry has been tasked with creating leaders of tomorrow, the industry fails to apply these strategies within its ranks. This is clearly visible with institutions still engaging in a top-down approach to leadership. Leaders recognize the need to teach leadership skillsets often aligned with their program specialties but fail to realize the benefits within their environment? The professional experiences of individuals in these academic environments tend to be overlooked. However, institutions are often equipped to recognize and adapt to change by leveraging the expertise within their buildings. This qualitative case study revealed that these institutions were less willing or unaware of the culture they were creating. This study revealed that these institutions were not actively developing leaders, which impedes successful change adoption.

This qualitative case study aimed to encourage leaders to support delegating decision-making to those lower in the organizational hierarchy in response to changing demands. Institutions must adopt a business posture of continuous improvement, as conventional methods prove unsuccessful. Higher education leadership must understand that adaptability is crucial to the industry and must be prioritized through the culture. Although the application of the findings

was relevant to leaders of any industry, it was important to note that even implementing these improvements does not guarantee sustainability. This is but one way to implement a small intentional distribution leadership progression, moving the industry in the right direction.

I would be remiss not to mention the COVID-19 pandemic and its effects on higher education, the economy, and personal experiences. The pandemic has only served to further highlight weaknesses that need to be addressed by the industry. As wages continue to climb, the perceived value of education diminishes. The industry must be able to retain quality employees, attract students, develop emergent leaders, and adapt to survive. Higher education as an industry must prioritize and conduct organizational assessments to determine strengths and weaknesses they can exploit.

Business-oriented organizations, or those that are more traditional, are far more familiar with the need to prioritize the customer experience. Higher education as an industry is newer to this change and must find ways to do the same. Customer demands are closely aligned to student outcomes, academic achievement, and the student experience. This understanding of the student focus that the organization must actively work to promote loyalty and rapport. Higher education has a unique opportunity to benefit from these relationships with alumni. These individuals can be ambassadors for the organization for the rest of their lives. They will talk about their experience, good or bad, and serve as a reminder of all the right things or not right things that happen at the institution. Additionally, many higher education institutions benefit from the support of their alumni programs founded on those individuals donating back to the university. As a result, the student experience and outcomes must be prioritized to ensure the reputation, financial impact, and benefits realized from those relationships. Leadership must consider these most basic outcomes if the institution seeks to understand its consumers. The principles of

customer focus or student outcomes, leadership development, and sharing competent decision-making align with the findings of this research.

Leaders must actively promote time for critical thinking to better understand this relationship and how distributed leadership can foster a culture that responds to change more purposefully. Leaders in higher education can serve the needs of student outcomes by implementing a framework that supports distributed leadership and shared decision-making that is aligned with the institutional mission. While higher education as an industry is shifting, this approach to leadership will usher in a new tradition by highlighting institutions' benefits to students and the communities they serve.

Potential Implementation Strategies

There are many ways higher education can implement the strategies outlined above. Higher education as an industry must prioritize and conduct organizational assessments to determine strengths and weaknesses they can exploit. Once the organization has examined all these aspects, it will be better equipped to build on strengths, boost weaker areas, create contingency plans for viable threats, and exploit every opportunity they are given. The organization can strategize to select and prioritize the best ideas so that they can focus energy and money on the most significant and impactful aspects of the assessment. These examples might include analyzing programs for financial solvency, expanding business opportunities, creating partnerships with the public, or working to improve how quickly technology is adopted.

Professional development is another implementation strategy that the industry needs to address. Leaders must ask themselves, "What happens if [we] invest in developing our people and they leave us? What happens if [we] don't, and they stay?" This unconventional mindset is how leaders of top companies in various industries create a unique and successful competitive

advantage. Academic institutions encourage faculty to work on professional development, but it appears to be less of a focus for staff. Organizations are incredibly busy trying to keep the lights on but must find time to incorporate development into a holistic strategic plan. The same staff running the operations and support activities in the business can easily fall behind in this industry. As budgets become tighter, one of the first line items cut is funding for training and development. This lack of opportunity was only compounded by Covid-19 as the pandemic dramatically shifted the offerings available for training. While remote training is a potential option, the lack of networking and experience gained at trade events are lacking.

Organizations have an opportunity to directly influence employee satisfaction and retention rates by implementing methods that support employees' advancement in their profession. An organization investing in employee development builds a culture of loyalty by promoting an atmosphere that suggests employees are valued. This perceived value helps the organization stand out from other companies. The organization does this by aligning that loyalty and support to the strategic vision to facilitate the achievement of business objectives. If employees feel valued, they will work harder for the organization. Turnover decreases indicate that the employees with the knowledge and skills to run the business can stay at the organization and do just that. To maintain a competitive advantage in today's marketplace, it is imperative that companies attract top talent and preserve the knowledge of business processes and procedures each employee maintains. The implementation of a professional development plan cultivates the best employees through a blend of commitment, inspiration, opportunities, and motivators to ensure the organization has the best chance to achieve its strategic goals. By recognizing the value and significance of quality employees, a business can achieve the greatness that makes them stand out in the industry. The findings indicate this is a program that is lacking support and

is actively being requested by employees. If higher education is in the business of selling education, it only makes sense that the same industry supports are in place for those who are employed by it.

The third strategy to implement is that of feedback. The organization cannot know how it is doing without open and honest feedback from its partners, consumers, and employees. Yet, we continue to see that these same people do not feel empowered to speak up. They might be worried about retaliation or consequences if they speak negatively. These individuals need to be empowered to voice their concerns and to feel heard. Organizations that only employ people who agree are doing themselves a disservice. These organizations hire bright and committed employees only to undermine their expertise. Understanding how to do the job, and more importantly, understanding why one does the job is an important first step in nurturing a connection between employees and the organization. Higher education can implement strategies to develop a culture that supports and encourages dialog by everyone in the organization. The individuals lower in the hierarchy can provide valuable insight into the business's daily functions. They are often most closely associated with the students. They want to see the organization succeed just as much as the top-level executive. The institution needs to find ways to constantly solicit feedback that it can use to further refine processes and procedures. Organizations must always look for ways to be more efficient, provide better service, outperform competitors, and progress. This can be accomplished through open forums, anonymous surveys, course surveys performed by students, performance evaluations, etc. It is important to note that it is not enough just to collect the data; the institution must spend time actively reviewing and determining strategies to implement changes based on the feedback it receives. It is important to

hear the positive and the negative and synthesize the material into strategic plans that provide value.

Summary Application to Professional Practice

This section explored the participant selection and participation process from start to finish to explain how the researcher attempted to avoid bias and use the interview guide as a benchmark for questions. Then the researcher identified the themes that contributed to the discovered themes section of this study. This introduction provided a comprehensive overview of the entire study. The next section included the application to professional practice and the introductory paragraph. The section was broken into two specific parts to explore improving general leadership practice and potential implementation strategies more thoroughly. A detailed discussion of how the study results can improve general leadership practice included comparing higher education to leadership in any industry. This section focused on leadership and the impact on culture in the business. The study then described the impact of lower decision-making in an organization to implement continuous improvement models. The section on potential implementation strategies discussed the near for organization assessments, professional development, and feedback opportunities to empower and retain top talent as a strategic advantage.

Recommendations for Further Study

There are many applicable areas for further study related to this research project. The first recommendation would be to expand this project to other four-year institutions in different states, and the second would be to explore private institutions within West Virginia. These two recommendations relate to the study because they provide both an alternative view from the opposite spectrum of in-state private schools and the view from other out-of-state institutions.

The first would be to expand this research to other public four-year institutions outside of the state of West Virginia. This research focused on a small subset of schools that only begins to scratch the surface of distributed leadership in higher education. This could be accomplished by researching public four-year institutions throughout other states. However, it might be beneficial to first compare those states that border West Virginia to assess differences between the environments. Exploring states that border West Virginia could provide a unique comparison of neighboring states. For example, West Liberty University was studied in this project; the university is close to Pennsylvania and Ohio's border. The researcher's previous university is situated right across a river from Maryland. It would be interesting to see how these locations operate compared to others in the more central part of the state. Many participants of this research referenced challenges related to state funding and politics; it would be recommended to study whether other states were experiencing those same issues or if it was unique to the state of West Virginia.

The second area recommended for further research would be to explore private institutions, which non-profit and for-profit institutions could further segment. It would be interesting to see how those institutions not funded by the state of West Virginia were impacted by leadership. It would be advantageous to explore whether these institutions practice distributed leadership and whether the culture is comparable to that of public four-year institutions in the state. This research might provide additional insight into how those institutions can solicit funding or tuition rates that make the institution economically sustainable. These insights might guide public schools to be more agile in this complex industry.

Reflections

The researcher has had many opportunities to reflect on the research process during this journey. As a researcher, it was important to understand how the research project progresses, the various decisions being made throughout, and points of interest outside the research scope but still find practical value in life. The research interviews stood out as the most pivotal point in the research process for me personally. It was inspiring to hear participants describe their work and their dedication to creating independent forward thinkers of tomorrow. As a result, I found myself contemplating specific situations and contextual applications that contribute to my everyday life. Even though I do not necessarily consider the time spent reflecting as work on this project, it is important to understand the connections to our purpose. This process of reflection through the research project and the academic program provided me an opportunity to see how far I've come academically, professionally, and personally.

Personal and Professional Growth

The opportunity for personal and professional growth is a topic I am passionate about. The part of leadership where we help others grow to become better versions of themselves is the reason I chose to study leadership in the first place. I started with a mentor who helped encourage my passion for leadership and then branched into more of a hobby learning mindset by reading anything I could get my hands on related to leadership. It was only then I contemplated getting a degree in leadership. It is incredible to think that I am at this point right now.

I do not consider myself a first-time college student by the standard definition. My father completed his associate degree the same year I completed mine; we graduated together. I am a nontraditional student who went back to school as an adult learner with a family, working full

time while going to school to complete my bachelor's in information technology. I personally could never have imagined having the opportunity to pursue a doctoral program; no one in my family ever has. My parents have helped encourage me to pursue this degree by supporting me the entire way. Education has afforded me more prospects than I could have ever dreamed. It is important to consider that sometimes we might take a nontraditional path, but the struggle along the way prepares us for the biggest challenges ahead.

I selected studying leadership because it is a topic I am passionate about. I further refined my topic by researching higher education in West Virginia because of my association with the state as a former employee. Also, my life is an example of just how impactful a great mentor and education can be. Throughout this journey, I have been reminded that the intersection of opportunity stands at one's ability to complete their education. Leaders must recognize how impactful leadership can be to everyone throughout their lives. Through this combination of purpose and intent, I was able to define a research project. My personal mission is to create opportunities to discuss leadership aimed at helping everyone be a better version of themselves, myself included. I utilized content throughout all the courses of this program as a way for me to explore topics to adopt pieces into my life, and now I can promote them throughout my work. Personally, I have grown as a person through the hardships this program has provided by encouraging me to step outside my comfort zone and work through challenges. I am grateful for each one.

Professionally, I have grown too. After working in higher education for five and a half years as an IT professional, I made the incredibly difficult decision to leave my place of employment. I had a great job, a great leader for a boss, and some stellar colleagues. However, I also recognized I had more to give but realized there was not necessarily an opportunity for me

to do so in that environment. I recently forced myself out of my comfortable career to work as an IT professional for the federal government. I have the chance to make a bigger impact with my new team by supporting healthcare professionals that protect underserved populations. I could not give up higher education completely and have started adjunct teaching. Admittedly, I enjoy being able to incorporate my story into the early part of a student's educational career. After this research project, it is fair to say that I understand just how crucial this point is for our future leaders. I am extremely blessed that I can help them earlier in their journey. I hope they are able to do the same for others later in life.

Biblical Perspective

This study focused on leadership's ability to impact student outcomes in higher education. Christian leaders must be able to apply biblical principles every day, both at home and in our work. "I will instruct thee and teach thee in the way which thou shalt go I will guide thee with mine eye." (King James Bible, 1769/2017, Psalms 32:8). To consider this research project from the perspective of God's character; God knows the path I need to take over the course of my life. I may have desires and purposes that I think I am creating for myself; and I may think I know what I need, but ultimately, it's God's will that will be done. "Be not ye therefore like unto them: for your Father knoweth what things ye have need of, before ye ask him" (King James Bible, 1769/2017, Matt. 6:8). Porter (2019) suggested that followers of God resign their personal will and allow God to lead them. I may have the capacity to determine my outward behaviors and understand the consequences of my actions, but I cannot discern God's intentions or guidance. Merida et al. (2015), suggested that God picks unlikely people to do His work; and suffering should be viewed as a blessing from Christ. From this perspective, I would say that God has

provided an opportunity for me as his unlikely vessel in accomplishing His will on earth through this experience.

God provides direction and counsel on how His followers should live and make decisions. Throughout this research, I realized that God has a different path for me; as a result, a new job opportunity emerged. This position directly supports God's children who are suffering due to a lack of healthcare resources, and my work directly impacts their health, quality of life, and family. The benefit of conducting this research project was to help determine how we can become better servants of Christ. It is important to recognize how our beliefs can impact the businesses we interact with. The existence of our own personal ontological and epistemological views of the world and religious beliefs attempts to explain justify why our belief is correct. As researchers, it is our view of reality that we develop the theories that explain our worldview. As a constructivist, the researcher reasons people experience and believe a subjective reality. God teaches us what is right or wrong, what pleases Him, and how to accomplish His will. Christians view God's work and purpose in their lives based on their beliefs. Through this research project, I could better align my personal purpose with God's purpose for my life and work.

God's followers integrate faith and belief into every aspect of their lives. Many of the underserved populations I have the chance to help are a direct result of God's purpose being fulfilled. If I had not completed this program, I am doubtful I would have had the perseverance, courage, or aptitude to take on such an important role. He has a higher purpose for those I am helping, and I am grateful to be a part of the process. The research aimed to fulfill God's purpose for me. He has provided me an opportunity of employment to make a bigger impact and continue the mission of leadership that can help others be better servants of Christ.

The goal of servant-leaders is to help others grow wiser, freer, healthier, and more autonomous (Song & Ferch, 2020). The researcher can bring all these outcomes to fruition by improving the business and the community it serves. The qualities of servant leaders include integrity, resilience, and stewardship. These specific qualities lend well to my role even as an informal leader at a new employer because I can utilize the talents that He has given me. Christian leaders recognize that all people are valuable to God. As Christian leaders in business, we aim to help guide those to serve God's glory in both direct and indirect capacities. The goal of this research was to have a better understanding of distributed leadership and the impact it has on higher education. As a result, the research provided practical knowledge that can help higher education institutions positively impact employees and students alike. It also provided practical knowledge that can be used in many other industries. This research can help individuals understand the importance of finding a way to serve Him with purpose, whether with one's career or education. As a result, this research helped fulfill God's plan, which is the ultimate goal. "As every man hath received the gift, even so minister the same one to another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God" (King James Bible, 1769/2017, 1 Peter 4:10).

Summary of Reflections

This research project and the entire doctoral journey have allowed the researcher to evaluate their own leadership perspective through professional and Christian worldviews. The project has provided an opportunity to explore ways to improve higher education for the industry, its employees, and its students. This research has strengthened the significance and importance of leadership in a person's life. The researcher has experienced periods of immense growth and reflection in their understanding of leadership in a business environment that can be applied to her professional career. This information will truly benefit the development of other

individuals that the researcher continues to serve and mentor throughout her career. Whether in a career or an academic journey, we must remember that the Lord will provide us with a path and the gifts we need to perform His work.

Summary of Section Three

This section included an overview of the study by describing the researcher's framework and methodologies to conduct the research. The findings presented the anticipated themes compared to the discovered themes and provided content from the participants. This section also described how the themes were relevant compared to the research questions by identifying how the data related to each question. The section on the application to professional practice provided insights on how this study reduced the gap in the literature, ways to improve general leadership practice, and potential implementation strategies to include professional development. Furthermore, it discussed empowering individuals to make decisions and implementing a feedback system. Recommendations for further study provided guidance on cross-sections of this study to explore private and bordering state schools to compare methods that could be adopted. The section on reflections and biblical perspectives provided an in-depth reflection on the research study process from the researcher's perspective. The section concluded with a summary.

Summary and Study Conclusions

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to discover how four-year public higher education institutions in West Virginia can leverage distributed leadership to influence the organizational culture and simultaneously improve student outcomes. The shift in the perception of a college education has changed in the state, effects of the pandemic continue to impact modality offerings, state budget shortfalls undercut the organization's financial solvency, and the institutions must find alternative methods to be competitive. The general problem to be

addressed was the lack of distributed leadership in academic organizations creating disparate hierarchical groups resulting in the inability of academic institutions to successfully implement changes that improve student outcomes. As the complex global market changes rapidly, these institutions must find ways to improve the student experience to remain sustainable.

The goals for the outcome of the research were to contribute to the body of knowledge and reduce the gaps in literature surrounding distributed leadership's application to higher education environments. The study expanded on how leaders fail to apply distributed leadership, behaviors that support and fail distributed leadership, how student initiatives differ from other change initiatives, and what elements position institutions for success in implementing changes to improve student outcomes. The study included 20 in-person, one-on-one interviews resulting in six discovered themes. The themes discovered through the research combined with existing literature identified implementation strategies applicable to the real world. These implementation strategies can be used across departments by faculty and staff administration by promoting professional development, empowering lower employees in the organizational hierarchy to make decisions, and implementing a feedback system to improve continuously. Employees must be allowed to learn and practice leadership within their organization. These employees are responsible for the daily activities that impact the culture and environment students will take into their future careers. Higher education as an industry must help to better prepare our graduates to become the future generation of leaders in their careers and communities. Higher education is in the business of education; part of that education should focus on leadership skills as many graduates become managers and leaders. Additionally, many individuals working at these institutions has the leadership skills necessary to make quality decisions; they just need to be afforded the opportunity to take on that responsibility. This study suggested that any industry can

benefit from improving general leadership practice through the intentional development of future leaders. The study concluded that distributed leadership significantly impacts the organizational culture. The goal of a sustainable organization should include the empowerment of the individuals in the organization. The individuals are the heart and soul of a company; faster decisions made by those closest to the situation can provide significant advantages. Employees that feel empowered also feel valued, which aids in retention. It is only when a person understands the bigger picture that they can confidently move towards accomplishing the organization's mission and goals. The benefits provided by distributed leadership can serve to provide a sustainable economic advantage necessary to remain competitive in the global market by creating the leaders of tomorrow today.

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Appendix A: Interview Guide Questions

1. Please introduce yourself, title, short description of employment history, any relevant background details, and describe your position.
2. I want to understand the world from your point of view. I want to know what you know in the way that you know it. Please describe your knowledge and/or experiences with leadership, both styles and practices, any formal education, mentorship, or hobby learning.

Follow up questions:

- a. Describe that in more detail.
 - b. How long was the education/mentorship?
 - c. What other styles have you explored?
3. What are some of the leadership challenges facing higher education today?

Follow up questions:

- a. What stands out around this phenomenon?
 - b. What do you think, feel, or view as influential in identifying challenges?
 - c. Describe some examples of challenges you think could be resolved.
4. To what extent is leadership discussed and are employees developed professionally in your organization?

Follow up questions:

- a. Do formal development or mentorship programs exist?
 - b. How are individuals selected to participate?
 - c. Are there opportunities for informal development? Can you elaborate on that?
5. Does your organization or boss provide you personally with opportunities to take on leadership and responsibility; what does that look like?

Follow up questions

- a. Walk me through this. Give me additional background on what happened.
 - b. Is there anything else that you think is important to know?
6. If you supervise or manage employees, do you provide your direct reports opportunities to take on leadership and responsibility; what does that look like?

Follow up questions

- a. Walk me through this. Give me additional background on what happened.
 - b. Is there anything else that you think is important to know?
7. What characteristics, attributes, or behaviors make a good leader?

Follow up questions

- a. Which of those characteristics, attributes, or behaviors do you think support distributed leadership, how so?
 - b. Can you explain further?
8. What characteristics, attributes, or behaviors make a poor leader?

Follow up questions

- a. Which of those characteristics, attributes, or behaviors do you think fail to show support for distributed leadership, how so?
 - b. Can you explain further?
9. Please describe how leadership at your institution searches for projects, resources, or links to enhance academic achievement and student experience.

Follow up questions

- a. What do you think about how the institution prioritizes or selects projects?
- b. What does it mean when you say...?

10. Do you think your institutional leadership specifically adopts change initiatives that are beneficial or positively influence students?

Follow up questions

- a. How does your organization prioritize student projects over administrative projects?
- b. How are student facing initiatives different from administrative?
- c. Do you think the balance of project selection is working well in your organization?
- d. What would you change?

11. Please describe how you see leadership's influence on the overall culture of your institution.

Follow up questions

- a. How would you describe the culture?
- b. Is leadership shared among employees with expertise or is it hierarchical in nature?
- c. Do you think leadership is aware of the culture or trying to actively make changes in the culture?
- d. What would you change? How do you think you implement those changes?

12. Please describe how you perceive interactions between leaders and followers within your department and institution; is leadership power defined by title, transactions between employees, rapport, or a combination of types.

Follow up questions

- a. Do you think the current culture and style of leadership is successful?
- b. Please elaborate on what elements you feel are working and why.
- c. Please elaborate on what elements you feel are not working and why.
- d. Do you feel employees have an opportunity to take on leadership roles?

13. Describe how you perceive the implementation of shared decision making in your institution; are the people with the knowledge, skills, inclination given the opportunity to voice their opinion?

Follow up questions

- a. Do you think the current culture supports sharing leadership opportunities?
- b. Do employees feel empowered to speak up?
- c. What changes would you make to support more opportunities for those with the expertise to be in leadership roles or take on responsibility?

14. Please describe if and how you would implement distributed leadership differently in your institution.

Follow up questions

- a. What specific changes are needed for higher education to be successful in implementing changes that positively benefit students?
- b. Do you feel distributed leadership works or would work better for your organization?
- c. What advantages might distributed leadership provide to your institution if adopted?
- d. How would you identify what elements of distributed leadership are present in higher education that positions institutions for success in implementing changes to improve student outcomes?

15. Please share any additional information you feel could be beneficial to the study regarding distributed leadership and identifying how distributed leadership can help to successfully implement changes to improve student outcomes.

Appendix B: Survey Questions

16. Please introduce yourself, title, short description of employment history, any relevant background details, and describe your position.
17. I want to understand the world from your point of view. I want to know what you know in the way that you know it. Please describe your knowledge and/or experiences with leadership, both styles and practices, any formal education, mentorship, or hobby learning.
 - a. How long was the education/mentorship?
 - b. Have you explored other styles, if so, what were they?
18. What are some of the leadership challenges facing higher education today?
 - a. What stands out to you about these challenges?
 - b. What do you think, feel, or view as influential in identifying challenges?
 - c. Describe some examples of challenges you think could be resolved.
19. To what extent is leadership discussed and are employees developed professionally in your organization?
 - a. Do formal development or mentorship programs exist?
 - b. How are individuals selected to participate?
 - c. Are there opportunities for informal development? Can you elaborate on that?
20. Does your organization or boss provide you personally with opportunities to take on leadership and responsibility; what does that look like?
 - a. Please explain in detail some examples. Provide additional background on what happened.
 - b. Is there anything else that you think is important to know?

21. If you supervise or manage employees, do you provide your direct reports opportunities to take on leadership and responsibility; what does that look like?
 - a. Please explain in detail some examples. Provide additional background on what happened.
 - b. Is there anything else that you think is important to know?
22. What characteristics, attributes, or behaviors make a good leader?
 - a. Which of those characteristics, attributes, or behaviors do you think support distributed leadership, how so?
23. What characteristics, attributes, or behaviors make a poor leader?
 - a. Which of those characteristics, attributes, or behaviors do you think fail to show support for distributed leadership, how so?
24. Please describe how leadership at your institution searches for projects, resources, or links to enhance academic achievement and student experience.
 - a. What do you think about how the institution prioritizes or selects projects?
25. Do you think your institutional leadership specifically adopts change initiatives that are beneficial or positively influence students?
 - a. How does your organization prioritize student projects over administrative projects?
 - b. How are student facing initiatives different from administrative?
 - c. Do you think the balance of project selection is working well in your organization?
 - d. What would you change; elaborate and provide examples.
26. Please describe how you see leadership's influence on the overall culture of your institution.
 - a. How would you describe the culture?
 - b. Is leadership shared among employees with expertise or is it hierarchical in nature?

- c. Do you think leadership is aware of the culture or trying to actively make changes in the culture?
 - d. What would you change? How do you think you implement those changes?
27. Please describe how you perceive interactions between leaders and followers within your department and institution; is leadership power defined by title, transactions between employees, rapport, or a combination of types.
- a. Do you think the current culture and style of leadership is successful?
 - b. Please elaborate on what elements you feel are working and why.
 - c. Please elaborate on what elements you feel are not working and why.
 - d. Do you feel employees have an opportunity to take on leadership roles?
28. Describe how you perceive the implementation of shared decision making in your institution; are the people with the knowledge, skills, inclination given the opportunity to voice their opinion?
- a. Do you think the current culture supports sharing leadership opportunities?
 - b. Do employees feel empowered to speak up?
 - c. What changes would you make to support more opportunities for those with the expertise to be in leadership roles or take on responsibility?
29. Please describe if and how you would implement distributed leadership differently in your institution.
- a. What specific changes are needed for higher education to be successful in implementing changes that positively benefit students?
 - b. Do you feel distributed leadership works or would work better for your organization?
 - c. What advantages might distributed leadership provide to your institution if adopted?

- d. How would you identify what elements of distributed leadership are present in higher education that positions institutions for success in implementing changes to improve student outcomes?
30. Please share any additional information you feel could be beneficial to the study regarding distributed leadership and identifying how distributed leadership can help to successfully implement changes to improve student outcomes.

Appendix C: Permission Request Letter

Date: 27Oct2021

Recipient: Dr. Mitchell Greco

Title: IRB Co-Chair

Company: West Liberty University

Address: 208 University Dr., West Liberty WV, 26074

Dear Dr. Greco,

As a doctoral student in the Business Department at Liberty University pursuing a Doctor of Strategic Leadership, I am conducting research to examine distributed leadership in academic organizations resulting in the inability to successfully implement changes that improve student outcomes. The project will explore what attributes and behaviors contribute to the success or failure of applying distributed leadership principles and by asking how student initiatives vary from administrative ones. The working title of my research project is Distributed Leadership in West Virginia Higher Education, and my study method will be a Case Study. This is a Doctoral Research Project and neither the research project nor the results will be published. At the completion of the study, I will provide your organization with a final manuscript and be available to make a presentation of the research project and results.

I am writing to request your permission to conduct my research at your organization and contact your employees to gain their participation in this study. Taking part in this study is completely voluntary, and participants are welcome to discontinue participation at any time. I welcome an opportunity to discuss this with you further and to answer any question you might have.

Thank you for considering my request. If you choose to grant permission, I will need a signed statement indicating your approval.

Sincerely,

Jennie Khun

Doctoral Student

Liberty University School of Business

Contact Information

Email:

Phone:

Appendix D: Permission Response**WEST LIBERTY UNIVERSITY**

208 University Drive
West Liberty, WV 26074

Mitchell J. Greco, D.M.A.
IRB Co-Chair
irb@westliberty.edu

November 21, 2021

RE: IRB #20211112-1

To: Jennie Khun,

Thank you for submitting your research proposal “Distributed Leadership in West Virginia Higher Education” to the West Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB). Your research was evaluated based on the federal regulations that govern the protection of human subjects.

Based on the information you provided to the IRB, it was determined your research is “expedited.” This research proposal has been approved by the IRB. Please use your revised documents in your research and keep in mind that the email correspondences with the WLU IRB are officially a part of your IRB application.

It is the researcher’s responsibility to follow all applicable procedures, policies and ethical guidelines. Changes that affect the subjects in any way cannot be made to approved studies, including informed consent documents, without prior IRB review and approval. An amendment / modification form is available on the IRB website. An exception to this is any changes necessary to immediately protect subject’s safety. A goal of the IRB is to prevent negative occurrences during any research study. However, despite our best intent, unforeseen circumstances or events may arise during the research. If an unexpected situation or adverse event happens during your investigation, please notify the IRB as soon as possible. If notified, we will ask for a complete explanation of the event and your response. Other actions also may be required depending on the nature of the event.

Should you have additional questions, or require clarification of the contents of this letter, please contact me and include the IRB# of your proposal given at the top of this letter above your name.

Sincerely,

Mitchell J. Greco

IRB Co-chair

Assistant Professor of Music

irb@westliberty.edu

Appendix E: Consent Form

Consent

Title of the Project: Distributed Leadership in West Virginia Higher Education

Principal Investigator: Jennie Khun, Doctoral Candidate

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be 18 years or age or older, full-time faculty or staff of West Liberty University, and be employed for a minimum of one year with the institution. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research.

What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of the study is to determine methods for which higher education institutions in West Virginia can utilize distributed leadership by exploring the relationship between leadership style, and the impact on the organizational culture, how the culture influence decision making, and ultimately how the institution can attract and retain students through those improved outcomes.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following things:

1. Respond to this email indicating your participation in the study.
2. If answering the survey, please complete the questions and the consent form and return to me via email; approximately one hour.
3. If requesting a virtual meeting, please respond via email with the consent form. I will then reach out to schedule a one-hour virtual meeting.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

[Option 1: No Direct Benefits] The indirect benefit participants should expect to receive from taking part in this study are improved leadership, culture, and decision making within the academic institution. The improved student outcomes could help create a more vibrant place to work and learn.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential using pseudonyms/codes. The researcher will use a coding process following the assignment of a letter, example participant A, participant B, etc. No names or other identifying information will be used beyond the interview, not appearing in transcriptions or the research project.
- Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer that is not shared by anyone else. Data will be stored on the Liberty University LMS and Microsoft OneDrive, which are password protected. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted.
- Interviews will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer and Microsoft OneDrive for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.

How will you be compensated for being part of the study?

Participants will not be compensated for participating in this study.

Does the researcher have any conflicts of interest?

[Option 1: Professional/Grading Authority] The researcher serves as a staff member at Shepherd University. To limit potential or perceived conflicts the study will be conducted an institution where they will not know who anyone who is participating.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University or Shepherd University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time.

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

Participants who withdraw from the virtual interview will have the option to participate in the written survey if they choose to do so.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study, Jennie Khun. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Betty Ahmed.

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.

Your Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

The researcher has my permission to audio-record/video-record me as part of my participation in this study.

If your study involves audio recording, video recording, or photographing participants, retain the above checkbox and permission statement, leave the appropriate method of recording listed, and remove the method(s) you will not utilize. **If you will NOT be recording your participant(s), please remove the checkbox and permission statement.**

Printed Subject Name

Signature & Date

Appendix F: Recruitment Template

11/16/2021

West Liberty University Faculty & Staff
West Liberty University
208 University Dr.
West Liberty, WV 26074

Dear West Liberty Faculty & Staff [I plan to personally address these emails]:

As a Graduate student in the School of Business at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree. The purpose of my research is to explore a flexible qualitative single case study is to expand the understanding behind West Virginia's higher education institutions potential inability to successfully implement changes and the effect it has on student outcomes. I am writing to invite eligible participants to join my study.

Participants must be 18 years of age or older, be full time staff or faculty, and be employed by West Liberty University for a minimum of one year. Participants, if willing, will be asked to participate in a virtual meeting or to complete a survey. It should take approximately one hour to complete the procedures listed. Participation is voluntary, names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but the information will remain confidential.

To participate, please reply to this email with the request for a virtual meeting or by completing the attached survey and returning it. Please feel free to contact me for more information

A consent document is attached to this email. The consent document contains additional information about my research. If you choose to participate, you will need to sign the consent document and return it to [me at the time of the interview or survey. Doing so will indicate that you have read the consent information and would like to take part in the survey.

Sincerely,

Jennie Khun
Doctoral Candidate; Strategic Leadership