A CASE STUDY OF THE CHARACTERISTICS OF A LEAD ADMINISTRATOR OF A
FULL-TIME FAITH-BASED VIRTUAL SCHOOL

by

Todd English

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the EDUC 989 Course

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APPROVED BY:

Dr. Fred Milacci, D. Ed., Committee Chair

Dr. Joseph Fontanella, Ed. D., Committee Member

Dr. Peggy Wroten, Ed. D., Committee Member

Scott Watson, Ph.D., Associate Dean, Advanced Programs
ABSTRACT

The purpose of this instrumental case study is to investigate the leadership characteristics of the lead administrator at East Online Academy (EOA). At this stage in the research, characteristics will be generally defined as the daily actions that affect the success or failure of leading the organization. The term “lead administrator” will refer to any individual who is the overall leader of the organization. The lead administrator for this study will be the director of the online school. The rationale for the study is a void in the literature addressing the characteristics of an administrator in the daily operation of a successful online school. The primary question is “What are the leadership experiences unique to serving as the lead administrator of an online school?”

The setting will include the EOA and the participants will include the director (lead administrator), the principal, and teachers of the organization. Data was collected from interviews, prolonged observation and document analysis.

Keywords: characteristics, accredited, virtual, leadership, transformational, transactional
Acknowledgement

I would like to thank our Savior and Lord, Jesus Christ. He is the rock and my guiding light whenever I felt like the dissertation was overwhelming my capabilities. I believe wholeheartedly in what Philippians 4:13 says, “I can do all things through Jesus Christ who strengthens me.”

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Finally, I want to dedicate this dissertation to my mom, Edith, but especially my dad, Garry. He had a dream for my brother and me to receive our doctorate degrees at Liberty University. On April 24, 2012, he passed away unexpectedly. I miss him very much. His belief in my abilities drives me daily to persevere towards a completed dissertation. Dad this is for you.
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List of Abbreviations

Association of Christian Schools International (ACSI)

East Online Academy (EOA)

Network of International Christian Schools (NICS)

Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS)
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Leadership is important in today’s society. Gilley, McMillian, and Gilley (2009) found that leaders direct all daily activities within an organization. A K-12 educational institution needs effective leadership to achieve its goals. Scholars assert that leadership has a direct effect on both student achievement and organizational success (Scribner, Crow, Lopez, & Murtadha, 2011). Similarly, Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins (2008) concluded that effective leadership is a predictor of student achievement. In fact, when examining the factors that contributed to student achievement, the authors found that effective leadership was second to effective classroom instruction.

To lead in a traditional K-12 setting, Leithwood, Patten, and Jantzi (2010) concluded that leaders need to be assertive, articulate, and fair. Conversely, leaders who work in an online K-12 setting need a unique set of skills because students and teachers are in remote locations. Questions arise from the evaluation of the leadership skill set of online superintendents. If the leader and the students are in two different locations, does the leadership still rank second in influence on student achievement? How does the leader manage the staff at remote locations? What are some daily challenges of being an online lead administrator? The expansion of enrollment of the online school program in grades 3-12 throughout America adds to the importance of this study (Picciano, Seaman, Shea, & Swan, 2012).

Researchers found that online education provides non-traditional students with a viable and a convenient option for delivering content instruction (Cavanaugh & Clark, 2007; de la Varre, Keane, & Irvin, 2010; Picciano & Seaman, 2009). While postsecondary educational institutions have provided online education for many years, K-12 schools have only recently
offered online instruction (Rauh, 2011). As of 2011 Picciano et al. (2012) estimated that enrollment of K-12 students across the United States enrolled in either blended or online education courses have grown to 700,000. Because the number of K-12 students enrolling in online courses has increased, there is a need to investigate the leadership characteristics of operating a regionally-accredited virtual school.

The researcher utilized a qualitative, single instrument case study to describe the leadership characteristics displayed by the lead administrator of a faith-based online academy that services students in grades 5-12. The data collection phase of this study involved the researcher interviewing stakeholders, conducting prolonged observations of the organization, and examining historical documents.

The lead administrator of an online, faith-based academy that has a high college acceptance rate of its students will be the focus of the study. The lead administrator has five years’ of online education experience as well as three distinct experiences of serving as either a principal or a director of brick and mortar schools; therefore, he has both traditional and online education experience. Eighty percent of the academy’s students completed their prescribed course of study and graduated with a high school diploma. The academy’s graduates had a 100% college acceptance rate. Since 2002, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) have accredited the academy. The academy was the first virtual, faith-based academy to receive such accreditation.

**Background**

Rural schools have utilized online courses and distance learning models for many years (Hannum, Irvin, Lei, & Farmer, 2008). Advocates of online courses in K-12 settings believe that online courses address the unique challenges that rural schools face, which includes their ability
to provide advanced courses or to find certified teachers to teach advanced courses (Hannum, Irvin, Banks, & Farmer, 2009). While prior studies investigated online education at the post-secondary level, there is scant research investigating online education in K-12 settings (Irvin, Hannum, Varre, & Farmer, 2010).

There are several reasons why prior studies’ findings concerning online education at the post-secondary level are neither transferable nor generalizable to online education at the K-12 level. First, students who enroll in online programs are more intrinsically motivated when compared to students who attend traditional school settings (Clayton, Blumburg, & Auld, 2010; Martens, Gulikers, & Bastiaens, 2004). Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, and Whitt (2010) identified and described the difference between online K-12 students and post-secondary students was the level of student engagement. Theoretically, an online grade school would have all academic abilities present in a respective class. Post-secondary students are enrolled in the classes to achieve a personal or professional goal such as credentials for a career, whereas all grade school students in online courses are not necessarily college bound. Student engagement in traditional post-secondary educational settings is vastly different from student engagement in grade school online educational settings. The difference in student engagement levels impacts the transferability of findings at the post-secondary level to a online grade school educational setting.

Because American students are competing academically with peers from other countries, school leaders recognize the advantages of K-12 online schools. The prevalence of online schools in the United States has increased to the point that they must meet the standards of a regional accrediting organization (Salsberry, 2010). Despite the proliferation of online schools, research has not identified the requisite leadership characteristics and skills that increase a virtual school organization’s ability to meet accreditation standards. Quilici and Joki (2011) stressed the
importance of effective leadership within virtual schools in today’s economical and political context, asserting a leader’s ability navigate the daily trials of online education determines a school’s credibility, viability, and success.

**Situation to Self**

As a school leader, I am constantly examining the educational landscape for new ideas to improve student achievement and student retention rates. Within the K-12 setting, online education has become a viable and low-cost option for providing students with advanced and remedial courses. However, a need exists to conduct a more thorough and comprehensive examination of the organizational experiences and structures of an online school and develop a clearer understanding of how to implement an online education program.

There are several philosophical assumptions of the study. First, a virtual school should receive its regional accreditation from a recognized organization such as the SACS. Second, administrators of a virtual school have similar duties to those of a traditional school. Finally, administrators of virtual schools make decisions that are consistent with the goals and objectives of the organization. The researcher utilized the pragmatic paradigm to determine whether the experiences of school administrators determine the overall school program (Cavanaugh, Barbour, & Clark, 2009).

It is essential to my Christian worldview that the research on characteristics of effective online lead administrators be conducted at a faith-based school. Jesus was the consummate leader because He led by example. By demonstrating an agape love, effective Christian-school leaders prepare students to succeed in today’s society and mold them for a deeper purpose. Christian-school leaders also contribute to students’ spiritual foundation by demonstrating agape love to their students.
As a public school superintendent, my ability to provide online education opportunities ensures our school district is able to provide students alternatives to traditional education methods. No longer can a public school sit back on its laurels and proclaim that it is the only option for a quality education. Because of state educational mandates, public schools are unable to offer the flexible scheduling options that online schools provide. Where they lead a public or private school organization, school leaders should positively affect others.

Problem Statement

The expansion of online schooling in K-12 has resulted in fully accredited, diploma-granting virtual high schools. DiPietro, Ferdig, Black, and Preston (2008) found that meaningful peer-reviewed research on the K-12 experiences of online schooling is practically void. While researchers investigated the requisite leadership characteristics of traditional K-12 administrators (Bredeson, & Kose, 2007; Wilson 2010), there is scant empirical research regarding the leadership characteristics of virtual K-12 school administrators (Barbour, 2010). Rice (2006) recommended that future research address issues such as evaluation systems, social and cognitive aspects of online schooling, and student supports.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this instrumental case study is to investigate the leadership characteristics of the lead administrator at the East Online Academy (pseudonym, EOA), which is a faith-based educational institution. EOA seeks to blend the ideology of Christian education with college preparatory curriculum for its students. Characteristics refer to the daily actions that affect the organization’s success or failure.
Significance of the Study

Leadership is a large motivating factor to the success of an organization (Hebda, Vojak, Griffin, & Price, 2007). Drucker (1999) found that leaders’ behavior has a direct influence on the work environment. The researcher will investigate the leadership experiences of the lead administrator of an online, faith-based academy. Unlike a traditional school setting, the majority of the people who function in the organization are at remote locations. The study is significant because in the future online schools could play a larger role in K-12 education.

Parkes, Zaka, and Davis (2011) utilized a case study design to investigate New Zealand’s first hybrid online course and found that the teacher often had to overcome problems, usually without the assistance of the respective leadership. The realm of online education requires an administrator to understand his or her role in support of the teacher and provide adequate infrastructure to be effective going forward (Davis, 2011).

There are several reasons why the researcher focused on the leadership of EOA. First, the academy has achieved regional accreditation from the SACS. Second, EOA graduates have a 100% college acceptance rate. Third, the academy graduates 80% of its enrolled students. Finally, the director of the academy has experience as an online school director and a traditional brick-and-mortar school principal. EOA is a private online academy that serves students in grades 5-12. The academy’s mission is to strengthen and to support parents in their Biblical responsibility to nurture and to train children. EOA uses a Christ-centered and technology-based curriculum. The academy creates an optimal learning environment for all students, prepares students for post-secondary success, and provides students with a Christian foundation.
Research Question(s)

The following research questions framed this study on the leadership characteristics of a faith-based online school leader.

1. Central Question: What leadership characteristics are identified as being essential for serving as the lead administrator of an online faith-based 5-12th grade school?

Researchers investigated leadership characteristics within post-secondary institutions (Bodla & Nawaz, 2010; Bond & Boak 1996; Burke 2010; Russell 2008); however, there is limited research investigating the requisite skills of a virtual school leader.

1. What characteristics do participants identify as being necessary for a faith-based online lead administrator to manage the day-to-day operations effectively?

The head of a school organization is both a leader and a manager. The school leader’s ability to manage the day-to-day operations is critical to his or her success. Reynolds and Warfield (2010) theorized that the role of a leader and that of a manager require a distinct skill set. This study will investigate the required skills of a leader of a virtual school organization.

2. What characteristics of a faith-based online school lead administrator do participants identify as being necessary to address the responsibility of the instructional program leader?

A school leader cannot succeed if a school’s instructional and pedagogical expectations do not align with those instructional expectations of the school system. In fact, Cray and Weiler (2011) found that superintendents believed that principals had limited knowledge of differentiated instruction as well as best teaching practices. At EOA, the principal also serves as the superintendent. Of paramount importance is the principal/superintendent’s knowledge of
exemplary pedagogical strategies and his ability to convey pertinent information to teachers at remote locations.

3. What leadership characteristics are identified in a lead administrator at a faith-based online school that fosters a positive school-community relationship?

School leaders must cultivate positive school-community relations, especially in virtual education situations. Crippin and Wallin (2008) concluded that the leadership styles of superintendents affect their capacity to manage cultural, economic, social, and communal influences. Teams increase their chances of succeeding when they follow their leaders. The leader’s ability to foster a positive school-community relationship is a pertinent facet of this study because geography will not define the EOA community.

**Research Plan**

The researcher utilized a qualitative method to conduct an in-depth study of the leadership characteristics of an online, regionally accredited school lead administrator. A quantitative method is not appropriate because the researcher did not quantify leadership characteristics. Stake (1995) found that if a researcher has a need to increase understanding as well as general knowledge of a topic, then the preferred qualitative design is a single-instrument case study. Virtual and tradition school administrators face similar challenges including rigorous curriculum, accountability, and standards. The single-instrument case study design is appropriate because it allowed the researcher to identify the requisite and effective leadership characteristics of a virtual school administrator and to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the related challenges the leader experiences within this distinct educational environment. The methods of data collection were participant interviews, prolonged observations of participants’ interactions within the organization, and document analysis.
Delimitations

There are several delimitations to this study. First, I interviewed participants who have at least two years’ experience in a virtual school environment. Mandating that participants have at least two years’ experience may limit the overall sample size because virtual schooling is a new concept. In addition to having two years of experience, I prefer that participants have traditional school experience. I believe that teachers who have worked in both the traditional school setting and virtual school setting will provide rich, detailed descriptions of the required and effective leadership characteristics of a virtual school lead administrator.

Next, and according to Stake (1995), researchers should use an instrumental case study when they need to develop a general understanding of a phenomenon. Because I will investigate the single topic of leadership characteristics within a bounded system, EOA, I will utilize a case study design. I chose not to do a collective case study because of the variations of within virtual school organizations. There are only a few virtual school diploma-granting institutions with SACS’ accreditation and the designation of effective, with EOA being one of those institutions. SACS deemed EOA effective because of its 80% student completion rate and 100% college acceptance rate of its students. The lead administrator has been with the organization for the past five years. A limitation of the study is the transferability of this study’s findings regarding leadership to other virtual school environments. Another limitation is that I will only interview participants who have worked in a virtual school environment. A final limitation will be the setting of the study. EOA is a faith-based online academy, and teachers work at EOA because of academic and spiritual reasons. With this in mind, employees could have similar ideals and experiences regarding faith-based school leadership. If their experiences and ideals are similar, then the scope of the study could be too narrow.
Case study methodology naturally lends itself to unintentional researcher bias. Safeguards must be in place in order not to “guide” the study in a certain direction. Another limitation is that the results are reliable and valid for a specific context and time. The evolution of technology and delivery systems within online educational organizations provides opportunities for further research.

In summary, the researcher will utilize a single instrumental case study design to examine the leadership characteristics exhibited by the lead administrator of a successful online school. A successful online school is one that achieves regional accreditation, has a high college acceptance rate of its graduates, and maintains a student completion rate of 80% or more. The study will investigate the leadership characteristics exhibited by the lead administrator of a successful grades 5-12 online school.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

The emergence of the Internet has changed how people live their lives. Facebook© and Twitter© have provided interactive platforms in which individuals offer the world a glimpse into their personalities. The accessibility and transmission of information, which once took several days to access and transmit, are one click away. The Internet has changed how companies conduct their daily business as web-based conferencing has replaced in-person meetings.

In addition to providing an interactive platform for individuals and businesses, the Internet has become a viable alternative for educating K-12 students. Parents and students are cognizant of the Internet as a means of instruction as well. Allen and Seaman (2010) predicted there would be a significant increase in the number of students enrolled in online classes.

The purpose of this study was to identify the effective leadership characteristics of the lead administrator of a faith-based online school. Research in leadership has begun to take a holistic view of the school leader (Eddy, 2012). Investigating the leadership characteristics of the lead administrator at a faith-based online school leader could provide a clearer understanding of the skills needed for effective leadership in an online environment. Avolio, Walumbwa, and Weber (2009) concluded, “Increasing attention is being given to examining how leadership causally impacts interim and ultimate outcomes” (p. 442).

This review of the literature focuses on the evolution of online courses in traditional settings to the establishment of online diploma-granting schools. The second part of the literature review addresses the guiding qualities for a school’s lead administrator. The review will focus on principals in a traditional school setting because of the vast amount of research in that area compared to online school principals. The first part of the review of the literature will
provide an overview of this study’s theoretical framework: the Full-Range Leadership Theory. The Full-Range Leadership Theory is a continuum that includes the following three leadership styles: transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership styles.

**Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework for this study is the Full-Range Leadership Theory (Bass & Bass, 2009). Bass’s Full-Range Leadership Theory stated that there were three types of leadership styles in organizations: transactional leadership, transformational leadership, and laissez-faire leadership (Bass, 1985). Bass (1985) asserted that all leaders demonstrated transformational and transactional factors, but they exhibited more factors of a particular leadership style. Leadership is dynamic and ever evolving. A successful school leader utilizes a full range of leadership skills to improve school performance, to transform the school’s goals and visions, and to address educational challenges.

Bass expanded upon Burns’ (1978) original transformational-transactional leadership of political leaders. Burns believed that transformational leaders motivated followers to higher ethical and moral standards. Bass’ model of Full-Range Leadership consists of three leadership styles and eight leadership factors (Bass, 1985). The three leadership styles are laissez-faire, transactional, and transformational. The transformational leadership style included five factors: attributed charisma, idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. The three factors of transactional leadership are: contingent reward, management by exception-active, and management by exception-passive (Avolio, Bass & Jung, 1996; Chan, 2001).

Leaders who practice contingent reward agree to reward a subordinate based on his or her ability to complete an assigned task. Leaders who exhibit management-by-exception-active
intervene before subordinates fail to meet predetermined expectations; conversely leaders who use management-by-exception-passive use corrective actions after subordinates are unable to meet expectations (Michel, Lyons & Cho, 2011). Educational leaders exhibit the three transactional leadership factors in their respective organizations.

Effective leaders should utilize the behaviors associated with the transformational and transactional leadership styles (Avolio, 1999). Although transformational leaders transform the organization and encourage others to serve a greater purpose, transactional leaders do not articulate and clarify employees’ roles and expectations (Whittington, Coker, Goodwin, Ickes, & Murray, 2009). Leaders who exhibit transactional leadership are unable to cultivate relationships with employees (Avolio, 1999).

The Full-Range Leadership Theory is a theory that contains eight sub-component behaviors. Kirkbride (2006) examined the eight components of the Full-Range Leadership Theory and provided examples of their application in a professional setting. The first component of leadership is laissez-faire leadership. Kirkbride found that laissez-faire leadership is the absence of leadership. Laissez-faire leaders withdraw from daily organizational activities, allow employees to make organizational decisions, fail to guide subordinates, and refuse to accept responsibility for their actions. Transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership are not compartmentalized. All three facets are intertwined throughout the course of a day.

Leaders who practice the Full Range Leadership Model exhibit both transactional and transformational leadership characteristics. While leaders demonstrated the full range of leadership characteristics, Bass and Steidlmeier (1999) found that leaders were either more transformational or more transactional. Bass and Steidlmeider also concluded that a universal leadership style does not address employees’ distinct motivational needs. They believed that an
An effective leader utilizes both transformational and transactional leadership styles to meet the daily challenges of leadership in the 21st century.

Transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership has differing effects on employees. Laohavichien, Fredendall, and Cantrell (2009) surveyed quality control managers to determine the effects of transformational and transactional leadership on employee quality improvements. They determined that transformational leadership had a positive effect on employees’ management practices while transactional leadership had no effect on employees’ management practices. Laohavichien et al. (2009) further noted there are higher levels of transformational and transactional leadership in successful companies than in unsuccessful companies. Consequently, transformational and transactional leadership are generally present in successful organizations.

Further examination of leadership requirements in education and across various industries reveals similarities. Bentley (2011) investigated principal leadership styles in today’s accountability era and discovered that transactional and transformational leadership were the two most common leadership styles in schools today. Transactional leadership and transformational leadership are the main pillars of the Full-Range Leadership Theory; while laissez-faire leadership style is the final and less prominent component. Transactional leadership and transformational leadership styles complement each other. Bentley found that both the context of the situation and the needs of the organization’s employees determine leadership styles and the transformational and transactional leadership styles were concurrently present in the organization.

Understanding and studying the history of transformational and transactional leadership could help identify the requisite leadership skills for virtual school settings. Valentine and Prater
(2011) studied the evolution of transformational leadership in education and found that a school leader was an administrative manager from the 1920s through the 1970s. Specifically, the school leader’s primary responsibilities were to manage the organization and to maintain the status quo. Conversely, 21st century school leaders must transform the educational organization by collaborating with followers and creating a unified vision. To develop a deeper understanding of the dynamics of leadership in organizations, researchers investigated the individual and collective impact of the transformational and transactional leadership theories across various sectors and industries; however, there is limited research investigating the effect of these leadership theories within educational settings.

**Transformational Leadership**

Groves and LaRocca (2011) examined the relationship between the leadership styles of 122 organizational leaders and the ethical values of 458 subordinates. They found that transformational leadership increased the level of ethical behavior within organizations. Groves and LoRocca (2011) also concluded that transformational leadership guided the organization’s moral compass, increased the level of ethical behaviors, and provided a vision for the organization. With respect to transactional leadership, they concluded that while transactional leadership was effective and necessary, it had no effect on the ethical values of the leaders and subordinates.

Avolio and Bass (2002) found that transformational leaders outperform transactional leaders. They identified four categories of transformational leadership: idealized behaviors, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. Leaders within an educational setting who demonstrate idealized behaviors, the first category, serve as role models to faculty, staff, and students. Leaders who exhibit inspirational motivation are
forward thinking and inspire a shared vision throughout the organization (Kouzes and Posner, 2012). The unified vision and increased motivation displayed by employees are the result of a continual cycle of constructive and authentic collaboration between leaders and subordinates. Avolio and Bass identified the leader’s ability to reframe questions and identify alternatives with intellectual stimulation. Individualized consideration, which is the final component of transformational leadership, addresses the transformational leader’s ability to recognize individuals’ needs and abilities.

Transformational leadership has drawn considerable interest among researchers studying various organizational leaders (Kearney & Gebert, 2009; Ozarelli, 2003; Wang, Oh, Courtright, & Colbert, 2011). Ozaralli’s 2003 study sought to determine 152 employee’s perceptions of transformational leaders. The author included employees who worked in advertising, communications, construction, aviation, energy, banking, and healthcare industries. Ozaralli determined that transformational leadership was a strong predictor of both employee empowerment and team success.

Kearney and Gebert (2009) sampled 62 research and development teams in the business world and found that when transformational leadership scores were high, there was a positive relationship between nationality and educational diversity and team performance. Conversely, lower transformational leadership scores had a negative effect on both the diversity and performance of teams. In summary, transformational leadership established an environment that encouraged teams to try new strategies in the marketplace in order to achieve the desired results.

Wang et al. (2011) conducted a meta-analysis of 117 independent samples over 113 primary studies. The authors found that the majority of studies determined that transformational leadership had a positive effect on employees’ performance at the team and organizational levels.
When leaders value and respect an employee’s opinion they empower both the individual and the team. This type of working environment facilitates goal attainment for the organization and the employees.

**Transactional Leadership**

The next sub-theory of Bass’ Full-Range Leadership Theory is transactional leadership. Transactional leadership involves an exchange between the leader and followers (Pieterse, Knippenberg, Schippers, & Stam, 2010). Judge and Piccolo (2004) found that transactional leaders motivate followers by providing immediate rewards for meeting predetermined expectations. Similarly, Bass (1998) believed that the essence of transactional leadership is the leader exchanging rewards for employee performance. Transactional leadership includes the three categories: contingent reward, management-by-exception (passive), and management-by-exception (active), (Michel et al., 2011). Management-by-exception (active) and management-by-exception (passive) are reactive managerial styles because the leader takes corrective action after mistakes occur. Avolio and Bass (2002) stated, “Transactional leadership occurs when the leader rewards or disciplines a follower depending on the adequacy of the follower’s performance” (p. 3). A leader who uses contingent reward leadership provides employees with a clear understanding of performance expectations and organizational rewards. Avolio and Bass concluded that contingent reward was the most effect transactional leadership style, but not as effective as any of the transformational leadership styles.

Bodla and Nawaz (2010) compared the level of transformational and transactional leadership among faculty members at private and public universities. They found that faculty members at private universities experienced higher levels of transactional leadership while faculty members at private and public universities experienced similar levels of transformational leadership.
leadership. Bodla and Nawaz believed that the lower faculty member-to-supervisor ratio increased the prevalence of transactional leadership at public universities.

Pike (2010) conducted a study of leadership at the Academies Programme, a Christian academy located in England. He found that transactional leadership between the school and local businesses transformed the school as students’ academic achievement improved over three-year period. Private sponsorships that reinforced the students’ responsibility to make the world a better place for current and future generations strengthened the academy’s core values and Christian ethos.

Bass (1997) concluded that the best leaders are both transactional and transformational leaders, regardless of the context. For instance, a leader in an online learning situation, theoretically, should exhibit similar transactional and transformational leadership characteristics as his or her brick and mortar school leader counterpart. Bass found that transactional leaders work within the policy and procedure constraints of the respective organization.

In summary, the Full-Range Leadership Theory consists of the transformational, transactional and laissez-faire leadership styles. Transformational and transactional leadership is present in dynamic, proactive leadership while laissez-faire leadership represents a lack of leadership.

**Review of the Literature**

To identify the leadership characteristics of a lead administrator at a faith-based online school, this study will focus on three areas. The first area will investigate online education with an emphasis on student achievement and social interaction in post-secondary and secondary educational settings. The second area this study will investigate is the characteristics of effective school leaders’ effect on student achievement, communication and collaboration, situational
awareness, and authenticity. The final area of research will focus on leadership at Christian-based schools as well as the following subtopics: the faith-based school’s role and a leader’s multi-faceted role.

**Online Education**

Online education, also referred to as e-learning, virtual education, and distance education, is not a new phenomenon in education. A form of online education has been present for over a decade in over 90% of the colleges in universities (Lamport & Metz, 2009). While online education has increased, Mayadas, Bourne, and Bacsich (2009) found that only half of the traditional private colleges offer any for-credit online courses. Although online education in the post-secondary realm is expanding, acceptance as a viable traditional-education equal is slow.

**Post-Secondary and Secondary Education.** In the United States, the number of post-secondary institutions offering degrees that can be earned completely online are being introduced across the post-secondary institutions across the country. Post-secondary online courses offer the student and the respective university or college the ability to be flexible in scheduling each semester. Online courses at brick and mortar universities count toward the graduation requirements similar to traditional courses. Online courses are viewed as a viable medium to help a student more effectively reach the requirements for graduation. The growth of online educational course and online degree offerings are expected to continue to increase in the future. According to a survey of post-secondary administrators by the Sloane Consortium and Babson Survey Group (Allen & Seaman, 2011), enrollment in online courses is expected to continue to grow due to the rising costs of fuel for the students. Economics will play a major factor in the proliferation of online course offerings at colleges and universities.
The integration of online education in post-secondary curriculum has prompted K-12 school districts to offer online or virtual courses. States are more and more understanding the importance of exposing students to online education. According to Brenner (2007), the Florida Virtual School is an important component of the curriculum in Florida because of the need of a specific skill set of graduating seniors to compete in today’s workforce. The technological skills that are required to complete an online course will benefit both the student and his or her prospective employer in the future. Other southern states have included online courses as part of their graduation requirements. The Southern Regional Education Board (2010) found that 14 of 16 states in its southern region offered a virtual school alternative. The Southern Regional Education Board attributed the increasing number of online course offerings at primary and secondary levels to the rising costs associated with traditional education. When compared to traditional education, online courses have lower overhead costs, which has a major impact on states’ budgets during economic downturn.

Today supplemental types of online courses constitute the majority of online education opportunities. The availability and accessibility of broadband Internet has resulted in the emergence of 100% online degree-granting schools. While empirical research of online post-secondary learning has increased, there is limited research regarding full-time online schools (Barbour & Reeves, 2009).

Because of limited resources, rural schools utilize online education to fill an academic gap and to help students fulfill graduation requirements. Ryan and Beaulieu (2009) found that online courses supplement the traditional curricular offerings and were the best alternative for small, rural school districts that were unable to provide similar on-site alternatives. For example,
a small rural school district might not have enough students to enroll in an advanced course to justify offering an advanced course on campus.

Cowan (2009) found that online education has a bright future in secondary education to supplement education because of the flexibility of the medium to fit a student’s schedule. All states, however, mandate the types of courses that a school must offer to grant accredited diplomas. Similar to rural schools in the United States, Barbour and Hill (2011) found that many rural schools in Canada were unable to provide certain courses.

The need to offer online courses at the secondary level is not exclusive to small rural school districts. Thomas and Bowler (2005) concluded that 80% of the school districts that offered online distance education do so because of a lack of course offerings. Rural and small districts are not the only type of districts that are included in the 80% that offer online distance education. In addition to supplementing traditional curriculum at the primary and secondary levels, online schools address homeschoolers educational needs.

In addition to school districts and parents, lawmakers believe that online K-12 schools combat the perceived failure of America’s public schools and allow students to keep up with their international peers. Finne (2009) added that online programs provide a quality education to students that might not have access to quality education. Online schools provide every student with sufficient broadband Internet access the opportunity to earn an excellent education based on a standards-based approved curriculum.

In the book Disrupting Class Christensen, Horn, and Johnson (2008) predicted that half of all high school courses would be online by the year 2019. In 2011, student enrollment in high school online classes was 1.8 million, which represented a 300% increase over a six-year period (Rapposelli, 2011). Rural and smaller school districts offered online courses that were
similar to the advanced course offerings of the larger, wealthier school districts. The evolution of educational technology has ensured the continued growth of enrollment in online education (Horn & Staker, 2011). Online primary and secondary schools could benefit from the growth of new technologies.

Unlike traditional education models, online primary and secondary schools offer students unique and convenient educational opportunities. For example, traditional education is limited by geography with regard to quality instructors and the availability of resources. Online courses are not susceptible to geographical limitations that traditional courses are susceptible to. Cavanaugh and Hargis (2010) added that flexible scheduling and pathways that online schools provide are necessary for the success of 21st century citizens. The busyness of today’s families and the inconsistent academic expectations of public schools have allowed online schools to play in the educational area. Despite the increased focus on online education in the K-12 arena, the majority of the research conducted has been in the post-secondary environment (Cavanaugh, 2001).

Today’s students have grown up in a technological world. Students are putting down their pens and notebooks and replacing them with laptops, iPads, and smartphones. Online education has become second nature for most students. Simonson, Schlosser, and Orellana (2011) found that students generally had a positive attitude towards online courses and little if any computer anxiety.

The increasing use of online education as a viable alternative in secondary education lends itself to further study. Research in the area of secondary online education and the leadership of such education is severely lacking (Cavanaugh & Clark, 2007; Cavanaugh, Barbour, & Clark, 2009). The majority of the research in online education has come from the
post-secondary area (Rauh, 2011). Examining effective leadership characteristics of leaders of online schools would be futile if student achievement of online school students were not comparable to their traditional school counterparts.

**Student Achievement.** Online education is beginning to play a major role in teaching and learning (Franceschi, Lee, Zanakis, & Hinds, 2009). An examination on how a student learns best via online learning must happen in order to ascertain the affect on achievement online learning. Hoskins and van Hoof (2005) investigated the academic achievement of 110 college undergraduates who enrolled in an online Biological Psychology course. They found that constructive dialogue between the instructor and the students had a positive effect on students’ achievement. The effect of the dialogue in the online course on a student’s achievement depended upon the student’s self-immersion in the respective dialogue.

Online education, however, could not reasonably be considered as a viable alternative to traditional educational delivery unless the student achievement in online situations and traditional situations were comparable. Prior studies that compared the academic achievement of virtual and traditional schools found students had similar achievement scores (Cavanaugh, 2001; Moore, 1989). The lack of difference in academic achievement gives validity to online schools as another option for students to receive a diploma.

To determine the academic impact of online versus traditional methods of study, Warren and Holloman (2005) compared the academic achievement of students enrolled in an online section and traditional section of a graduate-level course in teacher leadership and communication. Based on the post-assessment for the respective classes, they found that neither the students’ achievement nor their grade distributions were significantly different between the two sections. Nonetheless, with the proliferation of online learning in post-secondary settings,
Warren and Holloman recommended that researchers conduct further studies on student outcomes in online environments.

Similar to Warren and Holloman (2005), Mentzer, Cryan, and Teclehaimanot (2007) compared the academic achievement of students enrolled in online and traditional courses. This examination of an entry-level survey course of Early Childhood Education: Philosophy and Practice revealed that there was no significant difference in student achievement between the two sections. The fact that the class was an education class rather than a technology course had no bearing on the results. Online education has demonstrated, with respect to student achievement, the argument that “students do not learn as much in online courses” is simply a fallacy.

Traditionally, the prevailing belief about online learning was there is no significant difference in the academic achievement of students who enrolled in distance education courses, such as online learning, and traditional courses (Clark, 1994). However research conducted since the evolution of distance education into online education found that distance education (i.e., online education) produces significantly higher student achievement than traditional education (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2000). The improvement of technological capabilities in online education will continue to give rise to repeated media comparisons on student achievement in traditional educational programs and technologically-delivered programs such as online schools (Simonson et al., 2000).

**Social Interaction.** The concern of traditional education advocates is that students enrolled in an online course do not receive adequate face-to-face interaction opportunities. Poole (2000) investigated a case study of a graduate-level online course regarding students’ social perspectives of educational technology. She found that students had a greater connection to the university and their peers when they engaged in online dialogue. The university used various
mediums, including conference calling, to promote student dialogue and engagement. Organizations utilized computer conferencing as a tool to increase dialogue and engagement among individuals (Cifuentes, Murphy, Segur, & Kodali, 1997). Skype© and other video conferencing software promote this type of virtual “face-to-face” interaction. Nonetheless, critics often cite the lack of interpersonal communication as a downfall of online education.

As an alternative to interpersonal communication in a traditional school setting, today’s technology provides a means to exchange routine information and to facilitate the inquiry process between teachers and students (Moore & Kersley, 2011). To ensure effective communication in an online environment, Moore and Kersley (2011) concluded that the inquiry and communication process between student and teacher could be easily accomplished through available word processing and instant messaging software.

Prior studies investigated the types of dialogue present in online environments (Picciano, 2002; Ruberg, Taylor, & Moore, 1996). Picciano (2002) found that although research shows that student interaction is important for a successful course, questions about the different types of dialogue persist. To succeed in a virtual learning environment, the student must adjust to the nonlinear, asynchronous type of interaction that is common in virtual courses (Ruberg et al., 1996). While discussions in traditional classrooms are often linear and focus on a single topic (Picciano, 2002), discussions in online environments can deviate from the original topic, especially without an assertive moderator.

Summers, Waigandt, and Whittaker (2005) compared student achievement and satisfaction in online and traditional sections of a statistics course taught by the same instructor. Summers et al. found there was no difference in student achievement; however, student preferred the traditional method of instruction. The authors determined that students in the traditional
classroom more easily understood the instructor’s explanations when compared to students enrolled in the online section of the course, respectively.

LMS such as Blackboard©, and Moodle© establish online classrooms and provide a platform for student and teacher interaction. This interaction is limited, however, by the teacher’s inability to see the students’ body cues and discern students’ confusion about a certain concept. Liu and Cavanaugh (2011) theorized that a student’s time spent in the respective LMS is a good way for the instructor to discern if a student is facing difficulties understanding a specific concept. Researchers found the frequency of student logins was a predictor of students’ academic achievement (Dietz, 2002; Dickson, 2005).

In closing, Kearsley, Lynch, and Wizer (1995) warned that although a certain online learning activity is beneficial to college students, it may not be successful in a K-12 online setting; therefore, lead administrators must select the online learning activity that best addresses the needs of the target age group. Often overlooked by researchers is the need for strong leadership within full-time primary and secondary online schools and academies. The increase in online primary and secondary schools warrants the need to examine the leadership characteristics that are unique to the lead administrator position at online schools. What leadership qualities are required when a portion or all of the faculty, staff, and students are at remote locations?

**Characteristics of Effective School Leaders**

Research on the daily leadership characteristics of effective school leaders is lacking. Blase and Kirby (2009) found the following: “Empirical research provides few detailed pictures of the everyday social and behavioral dynamics of effective school-based leadership” (p. 2). Grissom and Loeb (2011) stated, “Existing research does not tell us enough about the skills
principals need to promote school improvement” (p. 1092). Leadership is the everyday actions that reinforce the organization’s vision and mission respectively. School leaders have a profound impact. This section addresses four aspects of leadership: a leader’s effect on student achievement, a leader’s ability to communicate and collaborate, a leader’s situational awareness, and leader authenticity.

Leadership’s Affect on Student Achievement

A school leader’s primary responsibility is to increase student achievement in their day-to-day responsibilities. Wahlstrom and Louis (2008) concluded that the primary responsibilities of school leaders are to convey high achievement and job-performance expectations and to foster positive school-community relations. They stressed the importance of research of how the leader’s behavior affects student achievement. The purpose of this research is to determine how the lead administrator of an online school affects students’ achievement and teachers’ job performance and cultivates positive school-community relations.

Rice (2010) examined both longitudinal state accountability data and previous research concerning effective principals to gain a clearer understanding of a principal’s role in an age of increased accountability. Rice found that a principal’s job is multifaceted and complex and the principal’s ability to manage various daily tasks determines his or her success. The author believed that a leader’s experience and self-efficacy were two of the greatest factors for successfully addressing the daily requirements of the job. Rice concluded a school district’s ability to recruit and retain experienced administrators determined the success or failure of schools.

Sanzo, Sherman, and Clayton (2011) examined the practices of successful middle school principals and their ability to facilitate change and to sustain performance. They identified four
common themes: sharing leadership, facilitating professional development, leading with an instructional orientation, and acting open and honestly. The principals identified themselves as involved collaborators at the school. Sanzo et al., concluded that the transparency in actions as well as the honesty and openness of the principals regarding teacher and student achievement expectations created a more focused learning and teaching environment.

As the instructional leader of a school, a principal is responsible for implementing an improvement plan when a school’s test scores are below expectations. While curriculum directors and instructional support personnel help implement the improvement plan, the building-level administrator is responsible for the success of the plan. Supovitz, Sirinides, and May (2010) found that principals impacted student achievement because they influenced teachers’ instructional practices. Even with the proven importance a principal has on student achievement, DuFour and Marzano (2009) concluded that principals simply do not have complete content expertise about the various courses. To affect student achievement, principals and school leaders need input from faculty and staff.

Marks and Printy (2003) examined the effect of transformational leadership on student achievement. They found a negative correlation between schools’ transformational leadership scores and their students’ test scores. The researchers also believed that effective leaders build shared leadership with teachers. Collaboration between leaders and teachers are critical to a school’s success.

**Communication and Collaboration**

Communication between the principal and the teachers help foster a positive working and learning environment. A principal’s ability to communicate high expectations for teachers and students is essential in the day-to-day operations of the schools. Valentine and Prater (2011)
determined that a leader’s ability to communicate an organization’s vision had the greatest effect on student achievement. The principal is responsible for communicating organization’s vision and goals. Effective communication is essential in the daily leading of an organization.

In addition to effective, consistent communication that reinforces the school’s vision and goals, a leader must value collaboration with various stakeholders. A study by Odhiambo and Hill (2012) examined teacher and parent perceptions of effective leadership and found that a leader’s collaboration with various stakeholders strengthens the organization immensely. The ‘pulling together’ in the same direction involved the teachers, students, parents, and the leader. The leader’s genuine concern for the people increased student achievement, and the rapport between the school and community.

Dimmock and Walker (2004) examined the characteristics of effective school leaders and found that they formed a holistic view of the organizational design regarding student learning and the school’s vision and direction. The leaders stressed that school improvement was not possible without school-wide collaboration and consultation. Dimmock and Walker found that the leaders strategically communicated their intentions to help guide the actions of the school employees. The authors believed the collaborative nature of the leaders ensured that student learning was the central focus.

A leader’s collaborative efforts serve a two-fold purpose. The leader has an opportunity to share the school’s vision and goals with stakeholders that will relay that vision in a positive way. Next, the leader and stakeholders are able to engage in constructive dialogue about the direction of the school. Reynolds and Warfield (2010) countered, “Effective leaders collaboratively create a vision and establish a climate for people in the organization to reach the
highest level of achievement” (p. 64). This genuine collaboration affects student achievement, the daily managing of the school, and school-community relations.

Louis, Dretzke, and Wahlstrom (2010) also concluded that collaboration gives stakeholders a sense of shared leadership. The foundation of collaboration and shared leadership, also referred to as distributed leadership, are genuine and influential relationships that help advance the personal and professional goals of the organization and the leader. These relationships allow the leader to develop trusting relationships with the faculty, staff, students, and parents.

Collaboration and communication allow the leader to develop the relationships needed to lead in a changing educational landscape (Odhiambo & Hill, 2012). Research found that school leaders who had the ability to communicate and collaborate had the greatest effect on student achievement (Drysdale, Goode, & Gurr, 2009). The ‘It’s about WE, not ME’ attitude of leadership builds lasting productive relationships that positively affect the organization.

**Situational Awareness**

Clear, concise communication and collaboration are only two of the skills that lead administrator needs to be an effective school leader. Horng, Klasik, and Loeb (2009) examined the daily tasks of lead administrators who worked for Miami-Dade County Public Schools. They found that administrators spent 54% of their time in school offices managing the day-to-day activities, 40% of their time monitoring student behavior, and 8% of their day in the classroom setting. Horng et al. also observed the lead administrators (usually a principal) and surveyed parents and teachers to determine which of the 43 tasks were the most important in the operation of the school. In the day-to-day managing category, the authors determined that the administrators’ most observed actions were managing student services and discipline, fulfilling
compliance paperwork, and managing student attendance-related issues. The majority of the lead administrators’ time was spent on tasks, such as discipline and attendance, which helped students achieve success.

For a school leader to be effective, he or she needs to have a comprehensive skill set. Spillane, Camburn, and Pareja (2007), divided the lead administrators’ tasks into four categories: administrative, instruction and curriculum, professional growth, and fostering relationships. Communicating to the faculty and staff the importance of student achievement can only be successful if relationships have been nurtured throughout the process. A leader must have internal transparency when fostering of relationships with faculty and staff. Authentic leadership is an approach that successful administrators utilize to cultivate the relationships, to cultivate positive interpersonal relationships, to manage the organization relationships, increase student achievement, and provide a positive foundation for school-community involvement.

**Authenticity**

In addition to being an effective communicator, a school leader should be authentic. An authentic leader is essential in the complex personal interactions of the lead administrator when completing his or her daily roles and tasks. Reynolds and Warfield (2010) concluded that organizations need authentic leaders. However, authentic leaders must be consistent with the vocalized goals and mission of the school or organization. Walumbwa, Avolio, Gardner, Wernsing, and Peterson (2008) concluded that an authentic leadership consists of four main components: self-awareness, internalized moral perspective, balanced processing of information and relational transparency.

Leaders should understand their strengths and weaknesses and make a concerted effort to improve on their weaknesses. Unless a leader understands his strengths or weaknesses, he or she
cannot be authentic with the students, faculty, staff, and community. Experienced successful principals understand the importance of self-awareness (Notman et al., 2009). Secondly, a quality transformational leader has a positive effect on the managing of a school, student achievement, and positive school-community relations grounded with internalized moral perspective (Wiley, 2001). An effective leader understands that moral absolutes never change. What was wrong 10 years ago is still wrong today. The third quality of a successful school leader is a balanced processing of data. Quality leaders seek to determine how data affect the overall school climate, student learning, and community relations. The educational reform movement has stressed the importance of leaders and teachers working together and making data-driven decisions (Lange, Range, & Welsh, 2012).

Relational transparency is a main component of authentic leadership. The degree to which authentic leaders demonstrate actions that are consistent with their words determines their ability to manage the organization, improve student achievement, and foster positive school-community relations. Leithwood and Riehl (2003) conducted a study on successful school leadership and found that school leaders played an important role in cultivating positive relationships between families and communities; in fact positive relationships between the principal and families strengthen both family-school relations and school-community relations. Leithwood and Riehl concluded that a school leader’s relationship transparency significantly affects a school’s learning climate.

Effective leaders communicate in a clear and authentic way to all stakeholders; in addition, they are the instructional leaders for the school. Leaders who lead but do not instruct cannot achieve sustained success. May and Supovitz (2011) surveyed teachers from 51 urban schools about principals’ instructional leadership. They concluded that the leaders who led
individual teachers were more successful than the principals that tried to lead the entire instructional faculty in the same way. May and Supovitz believed that leaders who possess a comprehensive understanding of the curriculum are able to improve the instructional practices of less proficient teachers.

Yet, instructional leadership is not a single, isolated action that leaders exhibit ‘s when needed. Instructional leadership, as with managing the organization and building positive school/community relations, requires consistent, purposeful daily actions. Waters, Marzano, and McNulty (2004) identified 21 key responsibilities of school leaders that relate to supporting student achievement and serving as instructional leaders: culture, order, discipline, resources, curriculum and instruction, focus, visibility, contingent rewards, communication, outreach, input, affirmation, relationship, change agent role, optimizer role, ideals and beliefs, monitoring and evaluation, flexibility, situational awareness, and intellectual stimulation. The aforementioned responsibilities require the leader to be able to transform the organization and successfully navigate its future in an ever-changing educational system, while not losing sight of the daily transactions that must occur to remain competitive today.

Leaders of Christian-Based Schools

America’s public schools are under attack. Public schools in America are seen as expensive, violence-ridden, and subpar academically. Allocating more money at the public schools is not fixing the myriad of problems. Since the 1960’s, the per-pupil expenditure in public education has increased three fold, after adjusting for inflation (Abshier, 2006). The type of educational institution, not the amount of funding and resources, affects student achievement the most (Wobmann, 2003). In a world of shifting absolutes, Christian academies give parents educational and moral options that are not available in public schools.
Faith-based Schools’ Role

Faith-based schools have always had a unique niche in society. These respective institutions are responsible for preparing students to succeed in a global marketplace and indoctrinating students into a particular religion or theology. The faculty and staff of these institutions play a major role in both academic and theological purposes of respective faith-based schools. The lead administrator must be cognizant of the various dynamics of the ‘in the world, but not of the world’ ethos that faith-based schools must employ.

Teachers at faith-based schools have the complex task of teaching faith-based principles and academic concepts each day. Smith (2011) interviewed 13 teachers from four different faith-based schools to determine the extent of the issues that faith-based educators and leaders face. One of the main problems that leaders faced was the inability of the teachers to remain doctrinally neutral on items. The teachers acknowledged that on pedagogical issues each of them attempted to remain neutral on pedagogical issues. However, the teachers’ integrated theological beliefs when teaching controversial topics, unless challenged by either a parent or a Christian doctrine. Leaders had a challenge to instill in the teachers a balance of what was appropriate in specific situations for the expansion of Biblical understanding and academic achievement.

In addition to being well versed in doctrine, school leaders must possess a comprehensive understanding of effective instructional practices. Chapman and Buchanan (2012) examined the effect that recent education had on school leaders, especially leaders of faith-based schools. While they believed that leaders need to have a complete understanding of the teacher-learner process, Chapman and Buchanan found that faith-based school leaders had a more comprehensive approach to leadership than secular school leaders. Ensuring that teachers taught
religious principles and instilled strong moral values was the main priority among faith-based school leaders.

Faith-based schools are committed to teaching a doctrine from a specific theological viewpoint alongside academic curricula. Christian schools are an example of a faith-based school. A study by Wolff, Ruyter, and Miedema (2003) concluded that the realistic expectations of Christian schools and discovered that everything from teaching styles to organizational arrangements should be derived from a Christian commitment. The administrators are expected as well to have the Christian commitment. However, studies on the role and effectiveness of administrators at Christian schools are severely inadequate (Council & Cooper, 2011; Beckman, Drexler & Eames, 2012). Although research on Christian-school leadership is lacking, the roles respective leaders occupy are extremely important and relevant.

**Multi-faceted Leadership Role**

Christian-school leaders, as well as traditional-school leaders, face the daunting task of handling a plethora of daily details. Dantley (2003) found that Christian school leaders exhibited purpose-driven leadership and understood the multi-faceted dimensions of the leadership role by pursuing ontological concepts and contributing to the common good of society. The author further concluded that Christian-school leaders had a higher purpose, a sense of calling, and a desire to contribute to societies moral system.

Collier (2012) found that Christian headmasters had a more multi-faceted role when compared to that of traditional school principals. The Christian-school leader is a visionary, a manager, and an instructional facilitator. In addition to the aforementioned roles, he concluded that a Christian-school leader is an advocate and defender of the faith, a husband, father, son, Sunday school teacher, community member, and devout witness to others about the glory of
God. A Christian-school leader’s effectiveness is dependent upon his or her ability to demonstrate the patience of Job and a person after God’s own heart.

Ethical leadership is imperative for a lead administrator in a Christian-based school. Reave (2005) surmised that leadership, particularly spiritual leadership, is contingent upon the respective leader’s ethics and integrity. A leader of a Christian-based academy is expected to practice what he or she preaches regarding ethics and character. Leaders are responsible for ensuring that the organization deepens its commitment to increase the moral values of students (Wolff et al., 2003). In a study that investigated the leadership characteristics of classical Christian school headmasters, Council and Cooper (2011) found that Christian school leaders were committed to the mission and vision of their respective religious institutions. They also believed that the primary responsibility of the lead administrator of a Christian-based school was to strengthen the organization’s mission and values by encouraging interaction between faculty and staff. Even with the benefits of the religious elements of a Christian private school, little is known about the Christian schools and their leadership (Dietrich, 2010). This study is an attempt to address the aforementioned gap.

**Summary**

Technology has changed how individuals communicate. Traditional educational K-12 institutions rely on the technological advancements to teach a more rigorous curriculum. The availability of technology throughout the country has brought rise to accredited online schools that grant high school diplomas. States have investigated online educational options as a viable alternative to traditional education. Online K-12 schools allow more options for homeschooled students and high school dropouts as well as parents who have a philosophical or biblical preference that the public school does not meet.
Online education was prevalent in the post-secondary institutions before the recent proliferation of K-12 virtual schools. Post-secondary institutions used online courses to supplement the regular curriculum. The online courses had the same standards as the courses taught on campus. Rising fuel costs for college students and a worldwide economic downturn prompted universities to offer online courses.

Within the realm of K-12 education, online education supplemented the regular curriculum by providing students with advanced courses that schools did not provide. Rural schools were one of the first to offer advanced courses through online education. Schools believed that online course offerings provided an opportunity to close the achievement gap that exists because of distance, resources, and availability (Hannum et al., 2009).

Accredited by the same accrediting agencies that accredit traditional school systems, online or virtual schools have vastly different setups. Some states now offer a full-time public virtual school experience for students such as the Florida Virtual School. Florida recognized that for students to be successful in life, they needed to graduate from high school with a comprehensive skill set (Brenner, 2007). Virtual charter schools, parochial (faith-based) virtual schools, and private virtual schools are some of the other types of virtual schools.

While online schools have a different administrative hierarchy, they still require someone to be the leader of the online organization. Empirical research investigating the phenomenon of online school leadership lacks when compared to that of traditional school leadership. A traditional school leader should be able to (a) manage the day-to-day operations of the organization, (b) increase student achievement, and (c) foster positive school-community relations. Successful school leaders are able to accomplish the aforementioned tasks.
Prior research underscored the importance of effective school leadership (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008; Wahlstrom, 2008). Researchers also identified the types of virtual or online school programs (Watson, Gemin, & Ryan, 2008; Watson, Winograd, & Kalmon, 2004). However, there is a lack of research investigating school leadership in virtual schools. With this in mind, I will attempt to address the gap in the literature by examining the leadership characteristics of a lead administrator at an accredited faith-based virtual school.

It is presumed that an effective leader has an indirect effect on the overall school program (Leithwood, Patten, & Jantzi, 2010). Leaders’ behaviors and decisions have an effect on the daily educational environment. Therefore, the leader’s ability to align his or her actions with the organization’s value and mission statements determines the success or failure of the organization.

Leaders who excel at managing the day-to-day activities, increasing student achievement, and fostering positive school-community relations should exhibit the full range of leadership, which includes transactional and transformational styles. Leaders who possess both transactional and transformational leadership traits practice the Full Range of Leadership model (Bass & Bass, 2009).

Because the lead administrator is the instructional leader of the organization, he or she needs to demonstrate competence in the curricular areas. Along with having a complete understanding of curriculum, the lead administrator must be an effective communicator. Lead administrators who clearly communicated the organization’s vision had the greatest effect on student achievement (Valentine and Prater, 2011).

A great communicator and collaborator must be authentic in order to lead his or her followers. Authentic leadership requires the leader to be self-aware of his or her weaknesses,
with both himself and his employees. Internal transparency is required in order to reach students for achievement, students and teachers for the daily managing of the school, and the community for positive school-community relations. Authentic relationships build trust between the leader and his or her organization and community. To foster a positive school-community relationship, leaders need to build trust between the school and the community.

Another trait that an effective school leader possesses is a commitment to quality instructional leadership. In particular, the effective school leader has explicit knowledge of research-based pedagogical strategies. Through daily interactions with teachers, students, and community members, the leader clearly articulates a commitment to instructional leadership.

A compilation of the administrative traits that effective leaders possess generally are referred to as transformational and transactional leadership. Transactional leadership is a behavior-reward relationship by the employees and the leader. Transformational leadership is a proactive approach in which leaders and employees regularly engage in open dialogue as they seek to transform and help the organization meets its goals. The Full-Range of Leadership Model includes the transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership styles (Bass & Bass, 2009).

Finally, leaders at a faith-based school have responsibilities that are different than those of traditional school leaders. Both faith-based school leaders and traditional school leaders are responsible for managing teacher morale, monitoring academic instruction, and supervising students; however, the leader of a faith-based school is responsible for ensuring that students receive religious instruction (Chapman & Buchanan, 2012; Collier, 2012).

Faith-based school leaders must also practice ethical leadership. Christianity is an integral component of a faith-based school’s curriculum and the foundation of the school’s
beliefs. Christianity compels all Christian leaders to demonstrate ethical behavior in every situation excepti
(Council & Cooper, 2011).

Faith-based school leadership is often studied because research on Christian-based school leadership is lacking (Dietrich, 2010). Christian-school leadership is a type of faith-based school leadership. Christian-based schools teach Christianity with the same vigor and rigor as they teach English and mathematics. Leaders need to prepare for evolving societal and academic dynamics while adhering to immutable Christian values.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of this instrumental case study is to investigate the unique characteristics of the lead administrator at EOA. The research design is explained in this chapter along with the rationale for the site selection and participant sampling procedures. A discussion of data collection methods, procedures, and data analysis specifications is also addressed.

Design

This qualitative study utilized a single instrumental case study design. According to Creswell (2007), a single instrumental case study design allows the researcher to focus on a particular issue in a bound situation or case. Yin (2009) stated that a single case study design is effective when the case is unique. This type of design was appropriate for this study because the researcher attempted to identify the necessary leadership characteristics of the lead administrator of a regionally accredited, faith-based, online school. Identifying the requisite leadership characteristics of the lead administrator of a regionally accredited is important in today’s educational and technological contexts.

Research Questions

Central Question: What leadership characteristics are identified as being essential for serving as the lead administrator of an online faith-based fifth-12th grade school?

1. What characteristics do participants identify as being necessary for a faith-based online lead administrator to manage the day-to-day operations effectively?

2. What characteristics of a faith-based online school lead administrator do participants identify as being necessary to address his or her responsibility as the instructional program leader?
3. What leadership characteristics are identified in a lead administrator at a faith-based online school that fosters a positive school-community relationship?

**Site**

EOA was the site chosen for this single instrumental case study. EOA (pseudonym) is a virtual school in the Southeastern United States that provides a comprehensive faith-based educational curriculum to students in grades five-12. This site was chosen for two reasons. First, the school has an 80% completion rate among the students. Secondly, the school was the first faith-based, online academy to achieve regional accreditation from the SACS. Accreditation from SACS was a major factor in choosing EOA for the respective study. SACS accreditation requires traditional and online schools to establish and reach certain benchmarks that equated to a successful organization. Students that attend the EOA reside in all regions of the United States. During the 2012-2013 school year there were 750 students enrolled. EOA has 25 degree teachers with 17 teachers holding advanced degrees.

The director of the school was separate from the principal. A superintendent in a traditional school system would have similar responsibilities as that of the director. The director has been the lead administrator at the online school for five years. Prior to that, he served in online education for an additional six years. He has experience also as a traditional school building-level administrator. In addition to the 25 teachers, there are three administrative staff/admissions/guidance counselors and one technology technician. The director is a central figure in the operation of the virtual school. Adding to the uniqueness of the study was the fact that the director has experience directing online schools as well as being the building principal and director of brick and mortar schools on two different occasions.
Participants

The participants of the study were the director, the principal, and the teachers. Only those participants with two years or more of online school experience were asked to participate. Requiring two or more years of online school experience ensured that the participants have been exposed to various leadership traits in an online setting. The sampling procedure was a purposive sample design. The director was selected for the study because of the director’s importance to the phenomenon. The faculty and staff of EOA were selected based on their meaningful input towards the research topic. Merriam (2002) stated, “Since qualitative inquiry seeks to understand the meaning of a phenomenon from the perspectives of the participants, it is important to select a sample from which the most can be learned. This sample is called purposive or purposeful sampling” (p. 12). Priority for the sample participants was given to the employees that have more than two years’ experience in an online school environment. The sample size of the faculty and staff was eight participants. Special attention was given to the sample size remaining small due to the nature of a case study research design (Gerring, 2007).

Procedures

The first layer of approval was that of EOA (Appendix A). The purpose of the study and the data collection procedures were explained thoroughly to the director of the organization (Appendix B). Following approval from Liberty University’s Institutional Review Board IRB (Appendix C), participants were recruited via email (Appendix D). The faculty and staff of EOA were selected to participate to provide a comprehensive view of the necessary characteristics of a successful virtual school leader. Once selected, participants signed consent forms (Appendix E). All faculty and staff participants who agreed to the study were either interviewed in person, via the telephone, or via email. The questions for the faculty and administration addressed the
requisite characteristics to lead an accredited, faith-based, online academy (Appendix F). The participants’ experience information was placed on an Excel spreadsheet. The lead administrator and the administrative assistant were observed in their daily professional roles. The observations of the day-to-day interactions were documented on an Observational Protocol Template (Appendix G).

**Personal Biography**

I was the human instrument in the study as a non-participant observer. Presently I am the superintendent of a public school district in Northeast Mississippi. I have held the position for two years. Prior to becoming the superintendent, I was a principal and assistant principal for nine years. I began my career teaching science technology at a small rural school. I taught science for three years and technology for three years. My love of science, technology, and leadership is exemplified by my educational experience. Currently, I am a doctoral student in Educational Leadership at Liberty University. I earned an educational specialist’s degree from the University of Mississippi in Educational Leadership. My Bachelor’s and Master’s degree were from Mississippi State University. My Bachelor’s degree was in Science Education and my Master’s degree was in technology education, respectively.

The Master’s degree from Mississippi State University was in Teacher Technology Education. The majority of the courses were taken via online methods. Over half of the courses that I have taken beyond my master’s degree have been delivered online. I, like others, are more familiar with online classrooms when compared to traditional education classrooms. Online education is the educational medium for today’s student to be successful in tomorrow’s workforce.
I have an intrinsic desire to study the characteristics of leaders in effective, accredited online schools. None of the participants in the study have any personal relationships with me. The data collected from the study was used constructively to help create a more comprehensive view of the characteristics required to succeed as a virtual school administrator. Online schools will play a larger role in education in the future. Even though I am a public school superintendent, I am excited about the possibility of online schools to reach those students whom traditional schools have difficulty reaching. My overriding beliefs in the study are that online schools can be a viable option of education for students, and online schools that meet the SACS accreditation standards (Appendix H) exceed acceptability as a viable option. Member checking, external reviewing of the data, as well as peer review were instituted to help ensure that the aforementioned beliefs in the educational potential of technology will not influence my data analysis.

I have no previous relationship with EOA. There were no employees at the institution that I am connected with, to the best of my knowledge. No employees that met the two years online experience requirement set forth were excluded from the study.

Data Collection

The participants were interviewed at the beginning of the study. The superintendent, admission/guidance counselors and teachers were the participants of the study. The interviews were documented in the data for reflective recall of the information to identify recurring themes from each of the participant groups. Field notes were taken from observations conducted on-site at the EOA.
Interviews

Yin (2008) believes that interviews are essential to a case study design because of the human component. Interviews for this case study were conducted face-to-face, via email, or video conferencing to the three different categories: the director, the principal, and the teachers. All categories were asked different interview questions (see Appendix C). The interviews were in-depth and thorough and were recorded with a digital audio recorder and transcribed by me. The questions were tailored for each respective interview group. Each group received questions on the following three topics: characteristics of the leader in the day to day operations, the leader’s role as the instructional leader, and the steps taken by the leader to foster positive school and community relations. Each group received questions based on their perspective of the three topics.

Other principals from local middle and high schools examined the interview questions. All of the principals selected for the examination of the interview questions have experience as building level administrators. The principals examined the practical significance of each question. After verifying the interview questions, the questions were given to a group of local teachers, counselors, and parents in order to check for clarity. Once the clarity and the research worthiness of the questions were established, the interview was conducted with the participants.

The participants that were interviewed were explained the process of the interview. Each participant was interviewed in his or her work environment. The interview questions in Appendix C were used as a guide for the interview. Participant responses to interview questions guided the depth and direction of the interview. Each participant was presented an informed consent form. None of the interviews occurred until after IRB approval for the project.
Observations

The participants were interviewed and observed in the main office of the virtual academy. Observations sessions were scheduled with the superintendent. I was a non-participant observer in the study. The dates of the observations were in conjunction with the period of the school year that the superintendent must exhibit leadership characteristics. For instance, in a traditional educational leadership role, there are periods of the school year that the superintendent must take a larger role in leading the organization than other periods, such as the opening and closing of school. Theoretically it should be likewise in the virtual education realm. Field notes of the observations were taken. The daily interactions between the superintendent and faculty were observed. A template was constructed with the appropriate observational protocol (see Appendix G) in order to record the observations in a way that will allow me to effectively look for reoccurring themes and patterns. The observational protocol template will implement Creswell’s (2007) recommendation of using descriptive and reflective notes.

Document Analysis

The third data collection method was an analysis of pertinent documents that demonstrate the leadership methods of the lead administrator when collaborating and communicating with employees. Bowen (2009) stated that document analysis is a “systemic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents” (p. 27). Corbin and Strauss (2008) argued that document analysis allows a researcher to gain meaning and understanding of a particular phenomenon.

The director and administrative assistants helped in the selection of which documents were important to the purpose of the study. Some of the documents that were requested were, but not limited to: student handbook, employee handbook, organization policy manual (if applicable), and any emails or memos to the employees from the director. The emails or memos
were be general. Job performance emails or any other emails that contain personal information
between the director and a specific employee were used for the study. Complete confidentiality
was practiced throughout the study. Confidentiality was achieved through ensuring that any
identifiable information will not be given in the results. Also, documents, interviews, and
observational data was kept in a locked fireproof safe to minimize the risk of a breach in
confidentiality.

**Data Analysis**

The data for the analysis was derived from interviews, an analysis of pertinent
documents, and observations. Either a transcriptionist or I transcribed the interview data
verbatim. Once an expert reviewer reviewed the interviews, I transcribed the interview data.
According to Bailey (2008), the audible and visual recount of the interview data should be the
primary foundation of analysis for a qualitative study. The data was organized based on the
themes that emerge. Thematic separation of the data was kept in a secure computer database.

The documents chosen for the document analysis was examined for emerging themes that
arose from the daily written interactions between the leader and subordinates. The observational
data was analyzed for selected themes that continue to emerge. Verbal and non-verbal responses
were examined to determine the extent of common themes that arose from the data. An
observational protocol template (See Appendix G) was used to record important data from the
observations that are critical to the study. An expert reviewer and I examined the interview and
observational data to correctly triangulate the data to identify the emerging overlapping themes.

Member checking of my preliminary analysis was conducted to ensure that the
perceptions derived were aligned with the perceptions of the participants. Member checking was
conducted in a way that preserved the privacy of each of the participants. According to
Murdoch, Poland, and Salter (2010), researchers should be cognizant of the sensitivity of information with member checking. Sensitive information was kept completely confidential and secure.

**Trustworthiness**

The first and foremost method of assuring the data is trustworthy is the triangulation of the data. The emerging concepts of the interviews and observations were triangulated with each other to identify patterns, themes, and concepts. Following the triangulation of the data, an expert reviewer from the local community college with extensive publishing experience examined the data to check for the correctness of the applied research practices, thematic saturation of the data, and emerging patterns. Another method to ensure credibility and trustworthiness is member checks. Participants were given the opportunity to review interview transcript data for clarity. Any deviation from the intended meaning and the perceived meaning of the responses was corrected. Peer debriefing occurred at the conclusion of the observational period to minimize any potential bias I might have had as the human instrument of the research. The documents from interviews, observations, and surveys were made readily available to other researchers. An audit trail will allow other researchers to evaluate the context of the study for confirmability and credibility for the study.

**Ethical Considerations**

Maintaining an ethical research project was of utmost importance. All data collected from the observations, interviews, and surveys was kept in a password-protected laptop. I, as the researcher, was the only person with the password. The data was encrypted and backed up online. The participants and the site remained confidential through the use of pseudonyms. The data was collected under the pseudonyms. Actual names of the participants and site will never
be used. A major ethical consideration was my unintentional bias over the opportunities that a
virtual school presents. This potential ethical dilemma was addressed through the frequent
examination of the data and the study of the local expert reviewer.

Accurate records of the research will be kept permanently for future auditing purposes.
Various protocols, data, and findings will be retained and stored in a secure folder that is
encrypted on my primary computer. In addition to the safeguards implemented on keeping the
data secure, the data was coded to protect the participants’ anonymity. Records of the study will
remain private and will never be made public. Identifiable information of the site or participants
will never be used so that the identity of the site and subjects are never compromised.
CHAPTER FOUR: DATA ANALYSIS

The purpose of this instrumental case study was to investigate the requisite leadership characteristics of the lead administrator at the faith-based EOA. The focus of the study was an examination of the requisite skills of the online school leader in three following areas: the day-to-day leading of the organization, the role in the instructional program, and the facilitation and cultivation of a positive online school/community relationship. The teachers/employees, the principal, and the lead administrator were asked differentiated questions that helped support the underlying research questions.

Participant Background

A brief review of the participants is included in Table 1. The participants were selected based on their years of experience in online education institutions. The participants were asked to give an in-depth view of the requisite skills of a lead administrator in an accredited, faith-based, online academy. Table 1 contains the pseudonyms for the participants, their years of online experience, and their respective job titles. Each of the participants was given a pseudonym to protect the identity of each participant, and also the institution as well.
Table 1

*Participant Background and Experience Information*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Job Title</th>
<th>Years of Online Experience/ Other Information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aaron Adams</td>
<td>Director, Lead Administrator</td>
<td>18 years/ 20 years in various teaching areas from college to international schools.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carol Brown</td>
<td>Christian Worldview Teacher</td>
<td>Eight years/ Also teaches Christian Foundations at the university level.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jim Johnson</td>
<td>Science/Computer Teacher</td>
<td>13 Years/ 20 years teaching experience in a traditional setting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lane McGraw</td>
<td>Social Studies Teacher</td>
<td>Five years/ Six years of international teaching experience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cheryl Monroe</td>
<td>Curriculum Developer/ Teacher Support</td>
<td>Seven years/ Adjunct math professor as well as public school teacher since 1995.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(continued)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Job Title</th>
<th>Years of Online Experience/ Other Information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Larry Newsome</td>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>Seven years/ 17 years teaching experience in traditional setting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karla Reece</td>
<td>Academic Advisor</td>
<td>Five years/ Five years teaching experience in public schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark Southward</td>
<td>Mathematics Teacher</td>
<td>Six years/ Taught in traditional classrooms and in Central Asia as well.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The chapter begins with a recall of the overriding central research question followed by supporting research questions. An analysis of the participants’ interview responses, observational data, and document examinations with regards to each of the research questions follows the central and supporting questions. The research questions guiding the study are:

Central Question: What leadership characteristics are identified as being essential for serving as the lead administrator of an online faith-based fifth through 12th grade school?

1. What characteristics do participants identify as being necessary for a faith-based online lead administrator to manage the day-to-day operations effectively?

2. What characteristics of a faith-based online school lead administrator do participants identify as being necessary to address his or her responsibility as the instructional program leader?
3. What leadership characteristics are identified in a lead administrator at a faith-based online school that fosters a positive school-community relationship?

Eight of the 12 employees with two years of online experience at EOA agreed to participate in the interviews. Pseudonyms were used for participant names to protect anonymity throughout the study. The interview questions that the teachers, the principal, and the lead administrator were asked addressed how a lead administrator affected each respective group with regards to the day-to-day operation of the school, the instructional program and delivery, and building positive school/community relations.

**Observation of East Online Academy**

EOA did not have numerous employees onsite; only the office manager and lead administrator were employed at the main office. In the past, the principal of the school was in the main office, but presently the principal works offsite. The small staff onsite necessitated that the employees have many job responsibilities. The office manager truly managed the office and most of everything else. EOA shares the campus with its parent organization, Network of International Christian Schools (NICS). Although the campus was expansive, EOA shares a small part of the campus. The employees of EOA were the only employees observed for the purpose of this study.

The Christian ethos is very evident upon entering the front doors of EOA. On the wall straight inside the front door are over 200 small statues that the founder of NICS has accumulated throughout his many years of missionary service. The statues are statues of idols from various religions. All of the idols are in the bowed position. In the middle of the idols was a very large statue of Jesus Christ with his arms spread out wide. The whole purpose of the display, according to the lead administrator, is that one day the whole world will recognize that
Jesus Christ is the only Savior. Idols of false religions will even bow down before Him one day. The purpose of EOA was very evident as soon as a person walks into the building.

Beyond the very impressive Christianity display in the foyer were 12 cubicles. The cubicles were for the teachers of the NICS who come in once per year to meet and collaborate. The teachers usually came in during the month of February. The teachers had been gone for about two weeks when the observation occurred. Each of the cubicles had relics and memorabilia from each teacher’s respective school’s country. All of the walls of the school had reminders of God’s work being done throughout the world.

The Christian worldview of the organization was shown throughout the building. Walls were adorned with pictures from the students’ experiences throughout the world. An education at EOA does not simply come from a book. Education at EOA consists of the traditional academic disciplines as well as a collection of the lived experiences of serving the one true Savior. Pictures on the walls of the school were from student experiences in Korea, Indonesia, South America, and the United States of America. Based on the observed pictures throughout the school, students from EOA experience more global cultures than similar students in traditional education setups.

The motto of the organization, “Real People, Real Places, Real Ministry” is posted throughout the office. EOA’s motto was usually surrounded by pictures of students and teachers in live, global experiences. The general feel of the office environment was that real people are doing real ministry for the glorification of our Lord and Savior. The religious tone of the organization is set by the relics, pictures, and motto that are posted throughout the main office and subsequent smaller offices.
The pictures on the wall only told part of the story. EOA does not solely exist to spread God’s Word, although that is the primary goal of the organization. Educational aspects of the organizations are also on display throughout the office building. The school’s SACS accreditation is posted throughout the building. The accreditation adds credence to the academic capability and expectations of the online, faith-based academy. In addition to the SACS accreditation certificate being posted, other accreditation certificates were present as well. EOA belongs to the Association of Christian Schools International (ACSI). The academy is also a member institution of the National Honor Society (NHS). The certificates are proudly displayed as a reminder that EOA students are able to participate in similar organizations that are available to their traditional-school counterparts.

The employees themselves were very busy during the observations. The administrative assistant had two video monitors on her desk, as did the director/lead administrator, Aaron. The video monitors were to monitor the work of the students and teachers. All inquiries that are not class specific went through the administrative assistant. The administrative assistant checked her monitors for specific questions. Director Aaron checked the monitors on his desk to see when students had logged in to their respective courses. Director Aaron acted as a support for the teachers and parents to encourage the students to do their best and put forth the effort required to be successful in the specific course. The administrative assistant assisted on most of the routine daily tasks from her desk.

The office itself was small compared to the office of a brick and mortar school. There were three offices in a line. The administrative assistant’s office was at one end of the office. The middle office was the office that formerly housed the principal of the academy. Currently, the principal works from his home in Arkansas. Although the office is empty throughout the
day, it is available for teachers who come to the main office to converse with NICS. The director’s office was a working office. Periodicals and reference materials were easily within the director’s reach.

The director/lead administrator, Aaron acknowledged that it was somewhat difficult to address a student’s progress because of the student’s ability to log on any time of the day. The differences in time zones forces Aaron to be purposeful in his dialogue with the student. Aaron primarily used email and Skype© to communicate with the students and parents. Much of his time was spent at the computer monitoring student progress.

EOA’s office was vastly different than a traditional office at a brick and mortar school. The office of EOA was very quiet compared to the traditional school office. A vast decrease in noise levels was noticed as soon as walking into the door. There was a clear sense of purpose and professionalism present in the foyer and the respective offices of EOA. The administrative assistant does not have to tend to students coming to her desk at all times of the day with various bumps, bruises, and mini-crises that traditional-school administrative assistants have.

The phone rang less than 10 times, on average, during the day-long observations. Observed phone calls were not from students or parents, but rather vendor and technical repair issues that required a live, real-time conversation. Communication between the students, teachers, and administrators occurred via email and video conferencing rather than on the telephone. The methods of communication are vastly different between online schools and traditional brick and mortar institutions.

There were vast differences in traditional brick-and-mortar school offices and the office of EOA. First of all, there was a very strong faith-based theme in the entire building. Every room contained an artifact that displayed the organization’s purpose of following our Lord and
Savior. The overall ambiance in the office was that the faith-based approach was non-negotiable. Students and parents that have theological issues with the Christian faith-based approach of EOA would be better served to look for other educational alternatives. The decorations and wall-coverings coupled with the observed actions of strengthening the faith among the employees seemed to have a profound effect on the organization.

Secondly, the office had a distinct ‘global education’ atmosphere. Pictures of exotic, foreign missionary fields adorned most of the walls in the main office. The experiences of the various teachers were evident throughout the building. Traditional brick-and-mortar school teachers usually are located in close geographical proximity to the school. The teachers of EOA live in all over the world. Based on an observation of the leader and the office, the education that students receive from EOA is truly a global education steeped in the ‘serving others’ mantra. This serving others mantra was supported and exampled by the director and lead administrator, Aaron. He strongly encourages the Christian walk be taught alongside the core curriculum subjects. His support of the teachers’ Christian pedagogy was witnessed through his input and encouragement of the teachers as they prepared their daily devotions for their respective students.

Finally, Director Aaron and the administration of EOA ensured that the students had as many opportunities to participate in extra-curricular activities as possible. Online students are naturally detached from each other. EOA allows students to participate in National Honor Society as well as Student Council. The concerted effort by the administration of EOA helps to close the opportunity gap between the students in traditional brick-and-mortar schools and their counterparts in online schools. The organization’s mantra of ‘Real People, Real Places, Real Ministry’ coupled with an education that is SACS accredited are examples of how Aaron and the
administration believe that a comprehensive educational experience for all students is a requirement, not a request.

**Document Analysis from East Online Academy’s Lead Administrator**

Director Aaron was asked to keep a blog of how he addressed certain situations that would give an insight on his characteristics and skills as a lead administrator of an online, faith-based academy. He shared in depth a budgetary situation that must be completed annually. His blog gave a glimpse on how others are involved in the process of successfully implementing and sustaining a SACS accredited, faith-based online academy for grades five through 12.

**Themes**

Based on the data from the interviews, observations, and analysis of pertinent documents, three themes emerged that addressed the requisite skills of the lead administrator of an accredited, faith-based, online academy. All three themes were present in the three data collection methods. The three themes also consist of several sub-themes. Themes were used to provide an investigative examination of the multi-faceted role of the lead administrator. The three themes support the purpose of the study and address the three research questions. Lead administrators of online, faith-based academies need the following skill sets,

- **Skill One: Communication**
- **Skill Two: Spiritual Leadership**
- **Skill Three: Instructional Technology Leadership**

**Communication**

All of the respondents stated that communication was an integral part of the skill set required for the lead administrator at an accredited, online, faith-based academy. The interviewees, however, felt that the communication from the leader was more important in
different areas. For instance, Mark (the mathematics teacher) felt that the communication of the leader was most beneficial in the cultivating of positive school-community relationships. The other participants believed that the leader’s communication skill set is most useful in the day-to-day operations of the school.

The participants emphatically stated that the lead administrator uses a multitude of communicative technologies such as Skype®, email, and instant messaging software to get the message out in different ways. It was important to Karla, the academic advisor, that the communication be timely and consistent. The participants believed that timely, consistent feedback and communication is required for effective instruction to occur.

Carol, the Christian worldview teacher, stressed that communication is vital to an online institution. The lead administrator’s communication, she continued, must also be purposeful. In a traditional brick-and-mortar school situation, the leader could unintentionally meet someone in the hallway and communicate the goals for the organization at that moment. Online educational environments do not lend themselves to unintentional communication opportunities. The readers could easily misconstrue the statements from the lead administrator in e-mails and chat sessions, therefore the need to be purposeful and calculating in what is said is of paramount importance.

Jim, the science and computer teacher, stated that the lead administrator excels at providing the time and technology for teachers to communicate and collaborate together. The lead administrator provides the technology and the opportunity for teacher collaboration. All of the participants exclaimed how collaboration among the teachers strengthened the quality of instruction in their respective classrooms. Aaron, the lead administrator, spoke of how a traditional brick-and-mortar school has a teacher’s lounge for teachers to interact with each other and exchange ideas for the instructional program. He stated that he is purposeful with teacher
collaboration in an online environment so the online teachers can have the same opportunity to collaborate as their traditional brick-and-mortar school counterparts.

Larry Newsome, the principal of EOA stated that Aaron (director/lead administrator) was always available for meaningful communication. The direct line of communication for the principal and the director (lead administrator) allowed each of them to do their jobs to the best of their abilities without any fear of misunderstanding the guidelines and expectations. If Aaron (director/lead administrator) were busy when the principal tried to contact him, he would schedule an appointment to communicate with the principal. Aaron, according to the principal, always made time to communicate. The principal, Larry, exclaimed that the priority that Aaron put on effective, consistent communication made everyone at EOA feel like a valued member of a team. Great communication between Aaron (director/lead administrator), Larry the principal, and the employees of EOA led to a high degree of empowerment in the organization.

Another area of communication that the participants felt was vitally important for the lead administrator of an accredited, online, faith-based academy was between the school and the parents and students. Aaron requires the teachers to communicate “face to face” virtually with the students at least once per semester. He also communicates constantly with parents to ensure that the students are putting forth maximum effort in their daily online studies. He reiterates to the parents about the role that they play in the online education of their sons and daughters. The director/lead administrator, Aaron felt strongly about his role as a communicator and motivator with the parents and/or students.

Cheryl (curriculum developer) and several participants noted that the director/lead administrator used various mediums to communicate with students, teachers, and parents. Aaron communicated daily with the staff to ensure that the appropriate academic and technological
tools are available for student and teacher success. Karla (academic advisor) also felt that the multiple mediums used by Aaron (director/lead administrator) increased the clarity of the communication. The daily communication with the teachers and staff of EOA afforded the lead administrator the opportunity to stay involved in the teaching/learning continuum. Carol (Christian worldview teacher) felt that the director/lead administrator consistently praised and encouraged the teachers’ efforts to improve the academic teacher/learner relationship in an online environment. The use of the various mediums to communicate with students and parents allowed Aaron to effectively build positive school and community relationships with the parents/students.

Each of the participants interviewed stressed the importance of communication in an online environment. Consistent communication was cited as the main way for the lead administrator to stay current on the situations that affect each of the teachers’ virtual classrooms. Jim (science/computer teacher) believed that understanding the situations that are evolving in the online organization is essential for the lead administrator to be successful. A grasp of situational awareness helped the lead administrator understand how the policies and procedures affect the teachers, students, and organization as a whole. Mark (math teacher) believed that the communication between the lead administrator and the faculty and staff helped set the policies that affected each employee daily. According to Aaron, the lead administrator, policies and procedures were only modified when necessary. He believed the change must be purposeful in nature.

Mark (math teacher) views the school-community relations as the community of EOA’s users and those they interact with. Mark found that some students come to his class with preconceived notions of EOA based on the experiences of others. Sometimes these relations are
wonderful because a student has had a good experience interacting with teachers and administration. Other times, Mark feels that parents are very much on edge because ‘they have heard from another parent or student’. Mark believed, therefore, that the more positive the school-community relationships, the easier it is for trust to be built between students, parents, teachers, and the lead administration. According to Mark, students truly benefit from the relationship in the long run.

Mark (math teacher) believed that the most important thing that the lead administrator did to cultivate positive school-community relations was to encourage and set policies that require interaction between teachers and students/parents on a regular basis. The director/lead administrator Aaron not only emphasized the importance of such communication but, according to Mark, he modeled the communication by participating in school events with students and by emailing announcements to the students and parents throughout the semester on a regular basis.

The teachers were not the only group of participants that felt that communication was the most important factor in leading an online organization. The principal, Larry Newsome, explained that the leader’s greatest trait with regard to the day-to-day operations was the constant availability to communicate. The director/lead administrator made himself available throughout the day for faculty and staff. If he were too busy to talk at a specific time, he would always make an appointment to discuss my concerns. Constant clear communication channels were present each and every day.

Another area that is very obvious to Larry (principal), but not the teachers, was constant dialogue about legal issues that have been present in other online situations. He is very cognizant of the legal ramifications of how to effectively run an online, faith-based academy. Larry stated that the lead administrator could be seen frequently throughout any given week
reading a legal publication related to online education and the legal pitfalls contained within. Director Aaron worked extensively to ensure that the policies and procedures that govern our organization are consistent with our mission statement and Christian worldview while maintaining complete legality. The conversations of legal updates between Aaron and Larry continued on a weekly basis.

Aaron’s communication with Larry about the legal ramifications of current online legal briefs was not an act of keeping information from the teachers. Aaron believed that Larry, as the principal, should be the one who is aware of the legalities and how they affect the organization. Larry’s responsibility for the legal ramifications of the organization allowed the teachers to focus on the academic and spiritual aspects of their respective courses. Aaron communicated the expectations to the principal, who in turn, communicated similar expectations to the teachers. Constant, consistent communication between Aaron and the employees of EOA empowered each group to do their jobs at a high level.

Clearly conveyed expectations allowed the teachers to become empowered to make their own decisions regarding daily decisions. Principal Larry and others felt that their opinion was valued and trusted, based on meaningful conversations with Aaron, when an opportunity arose to make certain decisions. According to Karla, it was a priority for Aaron to make teachers feel as if they were not working alone ‘remotely’. Aaron led by example. Larry (principal) and Lane (social studies teacher) felt that Aaron stayed out of the teachers’ way, but was extremely supportive at the same time.

The communicative aspect of the director/lead administrator’s job was evident in the observation of the organization as well. During the entire observation, the lead administrator and his administrative assistant was always monitoring the instant chat software or email to help
students or teachers in whatever way necessary. The overriding theme of the observations was
the commitment to monitor communication to alleviate any problem that hindered student
learning and growth.

**Atmosphere of collaboration.**

A byproduct of the constant supportive communication between Aaron and the various
groups of the organization was the expectation for strengthening the collaborative efforts
between faculty members. Lane, the social studies teacher, identified Aaron’s fostering an
atmosphere of collaboration as being a requisite skill of the lead administrator of an online, faith-
based academy. EOA’s lead administrator arranges the technology and the schedule for the
teachers to participate once or twice a semester in an instant message collaboration session. The
emphasis on the collaborative sessions is usually academic, but sometimes teachers want to
simply talk to other teachers. The lead administrator of EOA has led several of the collaborative
sessions.

Although several of the teachers mentioned collaboration as a requisite trait of the lead
administrator, the nature of the collaborative sessions is not always academic. In Aaron’s blog,
he wrote of how he collaborated with three other individuals regarding the budgetary process. In
order to do the annual budget, Aaron solicited the help of the principal, a statistical/financial
analyst, and an office manager. Each of the three individuals was reminded of what reiterated
their roles in the daily operation of the academy. The principal was asked to confer with the
department heads to determine the financial requirements to continue to offer the same level of
education in the upcoming year that is presently offered. The principal collaborated with the
department heads and calculated the budgetary amount required to maintain the present course
offerings.
The office manager was also included in the budgetary meetings. She was responsible for the daily bill payment. She kept an account for the vendor payments, technology costs, office operating costs, and other office related expenses. She along with the principal (Larry Newsome) was asked by the director/lead administrator to submit the requested monetary figures to the statistical/financial analyst to determine if the budgetary request was possible. The statistical/financial analyst then reported to Aaron whether the submitted budget proposals were manageable or whether the budgetary figures need to be revised. To give Aaron a definitive answer, the statistical/financial analyst ran a projected monthly cash flow for each month in the upcoming fiscal year. If the cash flow analysis projects that the budget is not financially prudent, Aaron began the budgetary collaboration process again with the respective party.

Although Aaron had the final decision-making responsibility for submitting the budget of EOA to the parent organization, NICS, he did not make that decision without getting the appropriate input from trusted stakeholders. Adams’s collaboration between the respective parties built personal and professional trust. The collaboration also gives the office manager, the principal, and the department heads a deeper understanding of the lengths that Aaron goes through to ensure a workable budget.

The director/lead administrator of EOA believes strongly in collaboration. Aaron collaborated with the principal, administrative assistant, and the financial/statistical analyst in the formation of the annual budget. Larry, the principal of the organization, likewise, collaborated with the department heads of each curriculum area to determine the financial requirements of each department. Leading by example, Aaron has conveyed an expectation of professional collaboration between the teachers and administration. Collaboration is not exclusively for the
principal, the teachers, and Aaron. Aaron frequently collaborates with administrators in the parent organization NICS. Aaron achieves cooperative collaboration by modeling the way.

Collaboration is a requisite skill exemplified by Aaron in the instructional leadership of EOA. Mark (math teacher) stated that the lead administrator leads the academy instructionally by selecting the LMS for the faculty and students to use. The selection of the LMS for the academy is not a job that Aaron does without input from other stakeholders. Aaron gets input on various LMS before making a decision on the best one for the organization. Larry Newsome, the principal of the organization, is involved heavily in the collaboration as well. Larry receives feedback from the teachers and the respective department heads on the professional satisfaction of the current LMS. Aaron is always collaborating with others, while remaining cognizant of the latest technological advances in LMS.

Collaboration among the teacher not only helped director/lead administrator Aaron make decisions that affected the entire organization, but it also helped team building relationships among the teachers. Teachers who felt as a part of the team, felt empowered to do their job more effectively. Karla (academic advisor) stated that Aaron was always available to support her whenever an opportunity arises. The support received from Aaron made her feel like a valued part of a team with a greater purpose. Teachers who are supported professionally by their leader feel like an important part of the associated success of the organization. She also said that Aaron was always available to support here whenever a situation arises throughout the course of a day. She said that she felt like the professional support required to succeed as a teacher was ever-present by the lead administrator. Teachers never felt that they were on isolated on a professional island. The lead administrator did admirable in making the teachers feel like a strong support system is provided.
Jim (science/computer teacher) also felt that the lead administrator was very effective at making the employees feel like their opinions and input mattered. Jim gave an example of the leader considering potential policy changes. Before Aaron considers major policy changes, the teachers have an opportunity to have input on the potential policy changes. Decision-making input, according to Jim, helps the online faculty feel like they are part of a team and not isolated. A byproduct of teachers having team-building decision-making input, according to Carol (Christian worldview teacher), is a created sense of cooperation, loyalty, and self-confidence. The other area of leadership that Carol identified as being present in the lead administrator in the day-to-day operation of the school was the ability to connect with the school’s community. Carol summarized the school’s community as a partnership with other online Christian schools that share the same belief and value system. The partnership with other similar faith-based online schools, the group of schools is able to strengthen and reinforce the role of Christ and Christian education in the lives of their students and parents.

The principal, Larry Newsome, stated that the primary way that director/lead administrator Aaron builds the team work attitude in the organization is his empowerment of them to make their own instructional decisions. Likewise, Larry felt like Aaron valued his opinion on decisions that affected the entire organization. Larry said that Aaron made decisions that were best for the organization and not necessarily what was best for Aaron. Aaron was effective in allowing teachers and the principal to make decisions while he supported them in the background. When a teacher was praised for his or her relationship building behavior, the lead administrator praised the teacher in an email to other teachers. Larry stated that the praise e-mails from the lead administrator were very helpful in fostering an atmosphere of teamwork. The lead administrator’s encouragement to communicate via video technology such as Skype©
helped create a sense of self-satisfaction that each teacher is a member of something more important.

Aaron exclaimed that the decision-making aspect of team building is primarily accomplished through instructional leadership. He is a team member to each teacher in the implementation of each of their online courses that they teach. He empowers them to make the decisions regarding the specific curriculum. Aaron believes that the teachers of the various courses are the experts in content. Allowing the content experts to build their own course exemplifies Aaron’s belief in the benefits of team building practices.

According to Aaron, another task that he tends to on frequent basis is collaborating with the parent organization, NICS, on the budgeting aspect of the organization. EOA has a rolling enrollment. An organization that has a rolling enrollment allows students to register at any point and time throughout the year. The rolling enrollment makes it difficult for Aaron to exactly pinpoint the amount of financial support each teacher will have available to themselves. Aaron stated that he has a statistical analyzer to do a cash flow projection on a weekly basis to ensure that EOA is fiduciary stable. Making sure that adequate financial support is available to continue God’s work is a major portion of Aaron’s daily duties.

Constant collaboration with NICS was required because the academy is solely funded by donations and student tuition. Aaron has a very small staff in the main office. The teachers are paid per student and not a set salary. Aaron is able to lower the overhead costs and remain financially viable by not paying teachers for students that are not enrolled in specific courses. The teachers’ compensation varies throughout the year due to the rolling enrollment of the academy. Teachers at EOA are not teaching at EOA solely for the money. All of the interviewed teachers believed that their position at EOA had a higher calling than a paycheck
could provide. Teachers are able to focus on their attention to their Christian worldviews without worrying about the financial aspects of the academy thanks to Aaron’s financial management practices.

Aaron stressed that the lead administrator’s role in the day-to-day operations is that of a support role. The principal and the teachers are the people ultimately responsible for facilitating the learning environment with the students. Aaron said that there must be explicit intentionality on his part to collaborate with the teachers and the principal to ensure that any problems that impede the academic process are addressing in a timely, but effective manner.

The majority of what Aaron does on a daily basis is monitor communication between the principal, the teachers, and the students to focus on the completion plan for each student. There are over 700 students at EOA in 19 countries. The students in the 19 different countries have vastly different cultures and educational expectations. Aaron stated that he frequently discusses with the parents the need to be active in their son or daughter’s educational process. He believes that without intentional parental involvement, an online student’s opportunity for success will dwindle. Success would not be possible in an online setting without constant collaboration of all parties involved.

**Building Positive Relationships between the School and Community**

The lead administrator empowered the teachers to participate in community-building outreach events to build school-community relations. Mark (math teacher) holds what he calls “Power Parleys,” a type of parent/supervisor and student meeting, twice a semester as a grade in the class. The lead administrator prior to Mark’s arrival already placed the “Power Parleys” in the course framework. Mark has found the practice very beneficial in communicating with the parents. Mark was encouraged to carbon copy important e-mails to parents/supervisors
concerning the starting of the class term, students falling behind academically, and the upcoming end-dates of the respective classes. One thing that Mark made clear was that he used email extensively to keep an open line of communication with the students/parents and the school. He tried different methods of communicating with the students/parents if the topic is particularly urgent or important. The constant stream of communication was encouraged by the lead administrator in an attempt to build strong relationships between the students/parents and the school itself.

Cheryl (curriculum developer) also viewed the positive school-community relationship as the relationship between the students/parents and each respective teacher. Cheryl stated that she uses the email account that was provided by the lead administrator. She also stated that she does not rely on email solely to keep a constant line of communication between the home and school. Instant messaging, Skype ©, or Google +© sessions are used as other tools of immediate communication.

The instant messaging, Skype©, or Google+© sessions are generally used to communicate with the students. Parents, according to Cheryl, are more than welcome to participate in those as well. Parents do have access to a ‘Parent Forum’ where parents and teachers can communicate about general topics. The ‘Parent Forum’ is hosted on EOA’s servers. The lead administrator encourages use of the ‘Parent Forum’ to establish a partnership between the school and community.

Karla (academic advisor), Cheryl (curriculum developer), and Jim (science/computer) gave their unequivocal recommendation to positive school-community relations. The extra time and work that is put into cultivating the school-community relationship is worth every bit of effort on Cheryl’s part. She said that the effort to do the ‘Parent Forum’, using Skype©, and
instant messaging makes her duties much easier to accomplish because the students, parents, teachers, and administration are all on the same page. They contacted the parents via email, phone, and Skype©. The mixed methods of communication ensure that students are able to use any technology they are most comfortable using. The lead administrator recommended the use of various forms of technology to contact the students and parents. The relationship between the teachers, the students, and the students’ parents did not begin at the first sign of academic trouble. Contact with the parents and students started at the beginning of a class so that relationships could be formed on a more personal level.

Karla (academic advisor) believed that positive school-community relations did not affect her job performance as much as a teacher in a traditional school setting. Since the online school has students across the globe, she felt that it would be very difficult to cultivate a positive school-community relationship. Each community has a differing culture and level of academic expectations. Karla believed that the personal relationship between students-parents and the teacher were far more important than building school-community relationships.

There was an unwavering belief that a positive school-community relationship was essential to the success of the organization. The primary opinion of the teachers was if there is not a positive school-community relation then the school is not a happy place to work. Teachers must be happy doing what he/she does in order to keep doing it. Jim (science/computer) felt that God has called him into education and gifted him in that area. He does not, however, believe that God called him to education to be unhappy.

One challenge with building positive school-community relationships via online schools is that the students are literally around the world. Carol (Christian worldview) found it very difficult to talk with students via interactive technologies due to the asynchronous nature of the
classes. Many of EOA’s students are from missionary families. EOA provides an alternative educational opportunity besides boarding school and homeschool. A lot of EOA’s students are not near English-speaking schools. Due to the distance between the each of the students and the teacher, Carol and his students cannot be online at the same time. Building personal relationships is difficult due to the time zone factor, but it is not impossible.

Carol keeps in contact by providing each assignment with teacher feedback. Carol believes that the teacher feedback not only reinforces the students’ efforts, but they also see there really is a professional that is willing to help on the other end of the communicative device. He stated that he uses a variety of communicative technologies that are provided by the lead administrator. The communicative technologies help to build relationships between Carol and the students and their parents. The primary source of communication between the student and Carol is email. He attempts to respond to all emails within 24 hours. Personal online chat is available to students as well. If the Internet connection is strong on the students’ computers, computer-to-computer video conferencing such as Skype© is available. The lead administrator makes available every type technology to aid in smooth communication between the student and teacher so that strong relationships can be forged.

Community relations within the mission agencies play a huge role in the employees’ jobs. There is constant stream of student graduating due to the fact that the majority of the students come from nomadic missionary families. If families become displeased with EOA’s efforts, then EOA will not get new families to continue God’s service. No new families mean fewer students, and fewer students mean that the school’s services would be adversely impacted. The purpose of EOA is to help keep the missionary families together on the mission field by offering a convenient, high quality education. EOA needs the families, and the families need EOA. The
teachers felt that they were participating with God on mission with Him to through their support of the missionary families He has already sent out. The teachers’ belief was that EOA’s classroom consists of the entire world. The lead administrator reiterates that EOA’s primary concern is spreading the Gospel throughout the world by praying daily for the employees and students.

Larry, the principal, expressed that he used e-mail and Skype® primarily when trying to build a positive school-community relationship. All new students and families are invited to a live Skype© orientation with Larry. This year was the first year for the video conferencing orientation, but Larry found it to be very helpful in making the transition into online learning easier. The director/lead administrator Aaron encouraged Skype© orientation opens a positive dialog between the families of the EOA students and Larry. Larry explicitly makes the students and parents aware that he is available to meet with them via Skype© at any time.

E-mail is the primary use of communication with the students and parents. E-mails are sent out to the students to add a bit of personal touch to the relationship. If a student needs to be reprimanded or disciplined, Principal Larry sent the statement to the parents and the respective student through e-mail. The open line of communication allows for clear and concise expectations to be expressed from the organization. Facebook© pages are also used to get out pertinent information. Students cannot, however, respond to the posts via Facebook©. Larry, in partnership with the lead administrator, worked feverishly to promote a positive school-community relationship.

The lead administrator facilitated this positive school-community relationship by requiring the employees complete a Skype© video call with each student at least once per semester. He also requires every student be emailed once per month. Lane (social studies) and
others felt that Aaron’s Skype© conferences with other teachers and supervisors were helpful in bringing together a group of colleagues for the betterment of the organization. He thought that the students feel the same type of togetherness after the video conferencing is done each semester. Lane had worked for Aaron (director/lead administrator) in a Christian school in Indonesia prior to coming to EOA. He stated that the Skype© calls allow the lead administrator to build the relationship with the faculty and staff as well as the students.

Available technology helps foster a positive relationship between the school and community. Face-to-face video chat sessions help provide the personal touch to the communicative process that the lead administrator and teachers deeply desire. Between the video chat sessions, the emails, and the constant stream of communication the teachers shared a bond that could only be accomplished by prolonged communicative efforts. Those effective efforts to communicate were encouraged and recommended by the lead administrator.

Director Aaron stressed that cultivating a positive school-community relationship is vastly different in online schools when compared to traditional brick-and-mortar educational institutions. The efforts of Aaron regarding cultivating positive school-community relationships must be intentional. Aaron was not likely to meet another student or teacher at a local shopping center. His meetings with the students and teachers of the ‘global community’ usually occur online via e-mail, Skype©, or some other computer based communicative technology.

EOA is a member school of the larger NICS. Aaron believed that the positive school-community relationship begins with the organization that provides the various resources for EOA to be successful. The work of EOA would be infinitely more difficult, according to Aaron, without the help of NICS. NICS is able to pool resources from around the globe to help individual member academies to proclaim the word of God through various curriculums.
Aaron (director/lead administrator) believed that the most important facet of the positive school-community relationship should be consistent with the Christian worldview of the organization. NICS has 19 schools scattered throughout the globe. NICS’s main priority is to spread God’s word throughout the globe. NICS is headquartered in the United States. Aaron is responsible for helping foster a relationship with NICS so that EOA can be used to fulfill NICS’s larger goal of spreading God’s word to all the people in the world. The relationship with the parent organization must be a priority for Aaron in order for EOA to be successful.

The majority of the school-community relationship, according to Aaron, is the interaction between the teachers and the students. Since the students and teachers are at remote locations, Aaron stated that the teachers have to be purposeful in their relationship building actions. Skype®, emails, and chat sessions are three of the various ways that Aaron requires the teachers to communicate with the students and their parents. Aaron does not, however, place all of the responsibility for communication on the teachers. Parents must still be involved in their son or daughter’s education, according to Aaron. Online education does not mean that parents are able to transfer the educational responsibility solely to the ‘experts’.

**Spiritual Leadership**

The second theme that emerged from the data was the necessity for the lead administrator of an accredited, online, faith-based academy to be the unequivocal spiritual leader of the organization. ‘Real People, Real Places, Real Ministry’ was the prevalent mantra of the organization that arose from the observations and document analysis. There was a feeling of a greater calling than educating students in core subjects among those in the organization. God teaches Christians that all men are created equal. Godly principles on how to treat others were conveyed by the lead administrator through the policies and procedures set forth.
A major requisite skill of the lead administrator, according to Carol (Christian worldview), is his ability to focus on the commitment to excellence in Christian education. The lead administrator always sought God’s will for the organization and humbly delights in obedience to God. Aaron gave Carol and the other teachers a Christian example through his dependence on God, and what it means to provide that Christian worldview not only through the school’s courses, but also in his communication with the faculty, students, parents, supervisors, and the outside world.

Carol explained that the most important aspect of EOA’s lead administrator focus on the instructional program of the program is that he prays and recognizes the centrality and authority of the Bible in every area of the school operation. Carol stated that prayers of the lead administrator usually were about:

- Blessings of friendship.
- Successful work.
- Humble gratitude.
- Balance between work and family.
- Strengthening the faith of the teachers in the school.
- Respect (both given and received).
- Modeling Jesus Christ in front of our students.
- Developing a Christian worldview in each student.
- Ensuring each student has a clear understanding of the Gospel.
- For God’s will to be done in and through the organization as they minister to the students and their families.

Carol’s position as department head makes him responsible for maintaining the consciousness for Christian studies at the school. He works to ensure that the school stays
consistent with their statement of faith. The coursework is also examined by the lead administrator and Carol to make sure the courses and teachers work in compliance with the overall Christian worldview. Carol recommended modifications of the curriculum to the principal and Aaron and further recommended which teachers should teach which subjects when the schedule for the coming year is being developed.

As a teacher, Carol provides his students with both direct and indirect instruction in the area of Christianity, Bible, Worldviews, and Social Studies. He is permitted, even encouraged, to write and use high quality curriculum that aligns with the SACS accreditation standards. He stated he was empowered by the lead administrator to take responsibility for building relationships with the students, parents, and supervisors of the students which they serve.

Carol appreciated the lead administrator giving him, as department head, complete autonomy in the development of every class, lesson, textbook selection, assignments, and tests. The lead administrator reviewed his work for quality assurance. The accreditation committee, under the oversight of the lead administrator, also examined Carol’s work for accreditation compliance. According to Carol, the lead administrator gave EOA’s teachers an opportunity to have major input on their respective courses. This input provided teachers very strong ‘ownership’ and sense of responsibility towards the success of their courses, respectfully. The sense of ownership, however, sometimes required after hours of volunteer time to polish and perfect each course.

According to Carol, the most important thing that the lead administrator did on a daily basis to ensure the success of the organization was praying for each student, faculty member, and the organization. EOA is a faith-based, online school that proclaims to advance His will. Carol claimed that when he was covered in prayer daily, she was blessed with inner strength, tranquil
peace, and God’s holy wisdom that helps her minister to her students. Aaron exhibited our need for reliance on God by praying daily for the organization.

Carol stressed that the lead administrator provides the visionary leadership for the organization. The administrator focuses daily on the commitment to high moral standards and academic excellence. Visionary leadership also encompasses how to best serve EOA missionary families as well as a conviction that all students will learn at a high level. Carol believed that without the leader’s visionary leadership with regards to academic expectations, the organization’s academic program would not be as high quality as it is presently.

Lane (social studies) concurred that one requisite skill of a lead administrator exhibited by EOA’s lead administrator was being the spiritual leader of the organization. EOA has a week during the semester that is entitled “Spiritual Emphasis Week.” During that week, students, teachers, administrators, and parents are actively in prayer for one another. The emphasis on prayer is modeled by the lead administrator and carried out by the employees, students, and parents of EOA. Lane unequivocally believed that the lead administrator is the spiritual leader of the organization first and foremost. The lead administrator’s other duties are secondary to being the spiritual leader of the organization.

As the lead administrator of the faith-based, online academy, Aaron believes that his main priority should be the spreading of God’s word throughout the world. His goal is for the students of EOA to beacons of God’s light so the world can be led to Him. Aaron stated that religious aspect of EOA is the overriding purpose of the organization. Aaron said this Christian expectation among the faculty, staff, and students is accomplished through daily, purposeful prayer. According to Aaron, the Christian ethos is supported by consistent Christian communication through words and actions.
Employees at EOA stated that the lead administrator being the spiritual leader of the organization helps in the day-to-day operation of the school as well as cultivating a positive school-community relationship. Carol, the department head for Christian Worldview Studies, stated that Aaron always seeks God’s will for the organization and humbly delights in obedience to God. By seeking God’s will for the organization, Aaron is able to focus the entire EOA family towards excellence in Christian Education.

Some of the participants spoke of Aaron being the spiritual leader for EOA. Lane (social studies) thought that the highlight of Aaron’s role as the spiritual leader is the ‘Spiritual Emphasis Week’. During the Spiritual Emphasis Week, the students, teachers, administrators, and parents are actively in prayer for one another. Aaron leads the group by emphasizing the power of praying for one another. By making praying for each other a priority, Aaron has been able to focus the students and teachers to consider the importance of God in their lives.

Almost all of the participants thought that the cultivation of a positive school-community climate in the online education realm was the relationship between the school/teachers and the students/parents. They concluded that the relationship between the teachers and the students were the most important facet in the cultivation of positive school-community relations. Since the academy is online, the community, they deducted, are the students throughout the world that attend the academy.

Not all of the participants believed that being the spiritual leader of the organization solely addressed the relationships between the school, its employees, and the students’ homes. Carol professed that Aaron has a responsibility as the spiritual leader of EOA to cultivate the relationship between EOA and their parent organization NICS. A strong relationship founded on Christian principles between EOA and NICS will be beneficial to the employees and students of
the respective institutions. The lead administrator of each organization shares in the cultivation of relationships responsibilities for being the respective spiritual leaders. Carol believed that the most important aspect of the lead administrator’s daily schedule is praying for the faculty and staff of EOA. Carol felt that God’s blessing was with the organization when Aaron said daily prayers for the faculty, staff, and students of EOA.

The principal of EOA emphasized the importance of working together with the lead administrator to provide spiritual leadership to the faculty and staff. Aaron works cooperatively with the principal to create an atmosphere of spiritual growth. The primary aspect of the lead administrator and the principal regarding spiritual leadership is to empower the faculty and staff to create their own Christian worldview that is consistent with Biblical principles. Faculty sharing their personal Christian experiences is recommended by the lead administrator and the principal in order to convey that a relationship with Christ is a deep personal commitment to His Word.

**Instructional Technology Leadership**

The third theme that emerged from the data was the importance of the lead administrator to provide instructional technology leadership to the faculty, staff, and students of the online institution. Mark (math teacher) felt that most of the lead administrator’s actions regarding the day-to-day operations of the school happen behind the scene. The leader’s “behind the scene” actions allow Mark to be successful. Something as small as the leader’s choosing an acceptable LMS can have a huge effect on Mark’s job. He also stated that the administrator deals with the technical issues that allow him to progress at a consistent pace. Technology troubleshooting is a major part of the daily duties that a lead administrator has to complete in order for online teaching and learning to continue at an acceptable pace.
Mark and others felt that the most intentional action by the lead administrator to address her responsibility as the instructional leader was her effort to stay up to date on the relevant information on online Christian education. Online Christian education serves a unique niche in the educational realm. The teachers had the confidence that the lead administrator’s efforts to maintain a knowledge of the latest research in the online Christian education field clearly positions EOA well academically.

One way the lead administrator affected the instructional program at EOA, was his deliberate and careful consideration of the LMS on the market. The lead administrator is always looking for ways to improve the use of the current LMS that EOA uses. In addition to examining the useful ways to improve the current LMS, the lead administrator attends seminars, and other professional meetings to evaluate the emerging LMS technologies. The lead administrator did not just select the appropriate LMS for the organization. The lead administrator was always available to help with any technical question regarding the respective LMS. Aaron did not select an instructional tool without first understanding the instructional tool. The lead administrator did not just talk the talk, he was able to walk the walk instructionally.

Mark (math teacher) had the unique opportunity to work as a curriculum adapter with the lead administrator over the past few years. During this time together, the lead administrator and Mark dissected various LMSs to determine what system would work best over the next few years for the organization. Mark’s first-hand knowledge of the administrator’s attention to detail led Mark to be convinced that the lead administrator’s expertise in this area is an attribute for the organization.

One item that arose from the interviews and observations was that the majority of the actions of the lead administrator, with regard to being the instructional leader, are behind the
Cheryl (curriculum developer) believed that most parents and some teachers do not understand how methodical the lead administrator is when picking the appropriate LMS for the teachers and students. She emphasized that the lead administrator picks the appropriate LMS with the consultation of each respective teacher. Painstaking efforts are taken, according to Cheryl, by the lead administrator to ensure the LMS’s template is appropriate and easy to use. The ease of use provides consistency for the students between each course, respectfully.

Teachers, such as Cheryl, developed their courses with the lead administrator. She stated that she has developed courses and also revised previously developed courses with the lead administrator. While developing the courses, the teachers and the lead administrator analyzed objectives, collected resources, provided lesson plans, and prepared the lessons for transfer into the respective LMS. In addition to selecting the LMS medium, the lead administrator was involved in the formation, and inclusion of specific educational objectives and standards. An emphasis on the pedagogy of each class was left up to the specific teacher, with support by the lead administrator.

The instructional design and implementation of the design through the appropriate LMS were a major part of the lead administrator’s daily job. Karla (academic advisor) deducted that with the lead administrator’s experience in an online situation gave the administrator validity among teachers when the lead administrator would get involved in the instructional design of the respective courses. Since the lead administrator had been an online teacher before, he was well aware of the daily successes and failures that each teacher experiences.

Aaron’s constant communication through newsletter emails gave the teachers comfort that they were not alone in their instructional role. The newsletters by the lead administrator gave encouragement as well as instructional updates. Aaron excelled at monitoring the latest
breakthroughs in online, faith-based education. The newsletters were a valuable medium for each teacher. The newsletters, according to Karla, help keep all of the teachers and employees on the same page. A secondary advantage of the newsletters was that the teachers understand that the lead administrator is available to them throughout the day.

Teachers were empowered by Aaron to write their own courses according to the state and national standards. The department head and principal oversaw the process. The lead administrator oversaw the department heads and principal. Instructional objectives and goals were closely aligned under the watchful eye of the administration. Although the lead administrator was involved in the alignment of objectives with the national and state instructional framework, he allowed each teacher the opportunity to “build” their own courses and assessments. Although the lead administrator is involved in supporting the instructional program, micromanaging of the program did not occur.

Jim’s dual role of department head and instructor (science/computer teacher) offered him an opportunity to see first-hand the type of interaction the lead administrator had with others in being the instructional leader of the organization. He characterized the lead administrator as being very supportive of each teacher’s role as the classroom instructional expert. The lead administrator was always looking for innovative ways to deliver the content. It was apparent that the lead administrator’s technologically innovative approach affords the online school and opportunity to stay a leader in the faith-based, online educational field.

The lead administrator was always encouraging to those he is directly involved with. He worked to inspire and motivate teachers to try new and innovative approaches to delivering the national standard aligned curriculum. The lead administrator is a staunch proponent of encouraging teachers to expand their comfort level with “outside the box” thinking with regards
to technology and instructional delivery. One example of the “outside the box” mentality that has been encouraged by the lead administrator is the creation of a fully contained course. Presently, Jim is working, with oversight of the lead administrator, on creating a class that does not require any outside texts or resources. The act of creating, critiquing, and designing content and curriculum broadens the professional aptitude of the instructors. The expansion of the professional aptitude of the instructors is a byproduct of the encouragement offered on a daily basis by the lead administrator. Several teachers responded that while rewriting the current courses they were encouraged by the lead administrator to ensure that the rewritten courses are aligned with the ‘spreading of the gospel’ ethos that is currently in effect at EOA.

Carol (Christian worldview) explained that the lead administrator exemplifies the traits of constantly trying new approaches, technologies, and even listening to ideas that sometimes seem “crazy”. By listening to the ideas of the teachers, the lead administrator led the teachers to not only be a teaching community, but a learning community as well. Aaron set up bimonthly training sessions led by other teachers to develop skills professionally by listening to colleagues talk about their professional skills or a recent conference or training opportunity outside the regular school professional development offerings.

Constant encouragement is a trait that the lead administrator exhibits that Carol and others identified as being a requisite skill to be a successful administrator. No matter how great a school is, there will always be at least one student, parent or supervisor that just isn’t satisfied. People are going to be dissatisfied at something, whether it’s an assignment, test, lesson, course options, transcript, teaching style, or even the teacher’s personality. Carol believed that when those challenges arise, knowing that the lead administrator is an advocate for the teachers is vital. If the teachers warranted correction, the lead administrator corrected the respective teacher in
private with the goal of solving the problem. EOA’s lead administrator corrects teachers while encouraging them, not scolding them.

Lane (social studies) and Carol (Christian worldview) viewed the lead administrator as working with the principal to ensure that the spiritual emphasis was always present throughout the instructional process. The lead administrator encouraged more than just emails to interact with the students. Aaron recommended a relationship deeper with the students than email can provide. Teachers associated success in being the school’s instructional leader with having a leader that understands the importance of the personal touch that can only be accomplished through communicative efforts beyond email.

The lead administrator is directly responsible for the appearance of the website portal and the classes through a LMS. The website and subsequent LMS was created to allow a teacher to require more than ‘read the book and answer the questions’ type of dialogue with the students. Interactive technologies arranged by the lead administrator afford the teachers an opportunity to raise the expectation levels of their students.

Larry, the principal, felt that the lead administrator leaves the writing of the various curriculum and objectives to those that are experts in their respective fields. He said that the lead administrator is more concerned about the accreditation of the school than he is the day-to-day instructional tasks that arise. Larry agreed, however, that the lead administrator should be more concerned about the accreditation status of the organization. He believes that the principal of EOA is involved in more of the design of the instructional direction of the organization than the lead administrator.

The lead administrator was not, however, non-supportive of those involved with the instructional design of courses and content. Whenever Larry needed help or had questions, the
lead administrator is always available. Larry stated that when he has a question, he can always go to the lead administrator and she will listen and give appropriate advice.

Larry works very closely with the teachers to develop their own curriculum. He stresses the importance to the teachers about including their own Christian worldview into the respective courses. Teachers including their own Christian worldview into the curriculum allow them to convey the personal relationship he or she has with our Lord. Larry did not believe in ‘cookie cutter’ religion. The instructors’ personal Christianity experiences are strongly encouraged to be shared with the students.

Aaron (director/lead administrator) emphasized that in most online environments the lead administrator did not deal directly with the instructional program of the organization. In the online schools where the lead administrator is the leader of the instructional program, the lead administrator and the principal are the same position. At EOA, Aaron Adams serves as the director of the online school. A principal is employed to be the overseer of the learning environment between the students and the teachers. Aaron did elaborate, however, that he is heavily involved in the instructional support given to the students and parents. Sometimes he will have to send an email or call a parent if a student’s work is falling behind what the respective student is capable of. Aaron believes strongly that the parents should be heavily involved in the education of their children. Online educational environments, by nature, put more of the burden of instruction on the parent and/or student. Aaron works with the parents to ensure the proper motivation and monitoring is present at all times in the online educational environment.

Aaron strongly encourages teachers to have major input in their curriculum. EOA has a practice of allowing professional freedom with regards to the formation and implementation of
the various curriculums. The teachers at EOA come from a very ‘globally diverse’ background. The teachers are allowed to bring the experiences from their part of the world into the curriculum. Aaron did not leave the curriculum development entirely to the teachers or department heads, however. Aaron expected the principal of the organization to be involved throughout the entire instructional formation and implementation process. The principal was a major part of the implementation of the instructional program at EOA.

Aaron stated that although the teachers, department heads, and the principal are extensively involved in the curriculum development, they are not alone. EOA is beginning to rely more on curriculum specialists. EOA has department heads and curriculum director’s that help focus the individual teachers’ courses to align the objectives with the academic requirements of the future workplace. The curriculum specialists employed by EOA are experts in their respective academic and religious field.

Aaron believed that the important facet of his role as the instructional program leader is the ability to support the experts in the respective curricular areas.

**Background of Situation**

EOA has a rolling enrollment policy. Students can enroll for courses any day throughout the year. Upon enrollment a student has one calendar year to finish the coursework. A student can finish the course work earlier than one calendar year, but one calendar year is the maximum time allowed to complete a course. The flexible scheduling makes completing courses more convenient for students, but provides a larger challenge financially. Aaron Adams, the director/lead administrator, believed that involving the stakeholders in certain situations is the correct course of action. Each year Aaron submits EOA’s budget to the parent organization, NICS. A smaller portion of the annual budget that must be completed monthly is a monthly cash
flow analysis. Rolling enrollment requires that the lead administrator monitor the cash flow of the academy weekly. Aaron has to be concerned with the near-term finances, as well as the long-term finances of the organization.

Jim (science/computer teacher) stated that Aaron is familiar with the situations faced by teachers on a daily basis since he was a teacher himself. Carol (Christian worldview teacher) further stated that Aaron communicates the academic expectations to both the teachers and the students. Aaron communicates the accountability expectations frequently throughout the year. The communication with the teachers and department heads regarding academic expectations exemplifies the importance of instructional leadership has to Aaron.

Lane (social studies) felt that Aaron exemplified instruction leadership by providing the technology and time for teachers to collaborate together. Aaron has even led several of the collaborative sessions. Collaboration among the teachers did not substitute for the autonomy that Aaron gives them in writing their own curriculum and textbooks. The teachers appreciated the fact that they were allowed to interject some of their own experiences into the daily lessons.

Larry Newsome, the principal, appreciated the fact that Aaron did not micromanage the instructional management of the teachers. Aaron supports Larry in his role as the immediate instructional leader. Aaron annually conducts a quality assurance review of all of EOA’s curriculum to ensure rigorous standards are maintained throughout the curricular program.

Summary

The role of a lead administrator of an accredited, faith-based online academy is multifaceted. Research from the study found that the skill set required by the lead administrator of an accredited, faith-based, online academy fell into three categories: communication, spiritual leadership, and instructional technology leadership. The lead administrator has to understand
the instructional, financial, spiritual, and management dynamics that are involved on a day-to-day basis. An online faith-based academy leader is able to succeed if he or she is able to inspire a shared vision with Christ as the centerpiece. Aaron was able to effectively transform EOA into a special place of SACS accreditation, academic learning, and Christian foundation.

The first skill that is required of the lead administrator of an accredited, faith-based, online academy is the ability to communicate effectively. Communication is extremely important in an online setting. Students in online schools can be scattered throughout the world. A leader’s ability to communicate effectively through different mediums helps lessen the apprehension among the students and teachers that arise from being at remote locations. Effective leaders also are able to use the ability to communicate to market the school to sustain and/or grow the enrollment.

The second skill that the lead administrator of an accredited, online, faith-based academy must be cognizant of is his or her responsibility to provide spiritual leadership. A Christian academy is founded upon the principles of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. The lead administrator should empower the faculty and students to cultivate and grow their spiritual foundation. An effective administrator emulates what a personal walk with Christ should be.

The third skill that the lead administrator of an accredited, online faith based academy must exhibit is effective instructional technology leadership. It is imperative that the leader of an online school be well versed in the latest instructional technology innovations. If the leader is not a student of advances in instructional technology, the students and teachers of the school are at a disadvantage educationally. Being able to lead students and teachers in the use of technology and being able to troubleshoot the technology is a major part of the lead administrator’s daily activities.
CHAPTER FIVE: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of this single instrument case study was to determine the requisite skills of a lead administrator of an accredited, online, faith-based academy. The leader of EOA was chosen because it was the first online Christian academy to achieve the honor of SACS accreditation. The accreditation is the same accreditation that brick and mortar colleges and schools strive to achieve. The accreditation process requires EOA to excel in five standard areas. The five standard areas for SACS accreditation are: purpose and direction, governance and leadership, teaching and assessing for learning, resources and support systems, and using results for continuous improvement (Appendix H).

The primary objective for the study is to acquire a deeper understanding of the types of characteristics or traits are required for an online lead administrator. Research is plentiful regarding administrators of brick-and-mortar schools. Alternatively, research is lacking with regards to online school administrators (Cavanaugh et al., 2009). Online education is exploding in numbers (Picciano et al., 2012). The increase in enrollment in online educational institutions has given more credence to the need to study leadership in the respective online schools.

Summary of Findings

The findings are a result of interviews of teachers, the principal and the lead administrator of EOA. An observation of the academy, as well as a document analysis of the lead administrator’s leadership styles were also included in the findings. During the study it was very evident that the role of the lead administrator at an online, faith-based academy was comprehensive and multi-faceted. There were characteristics that were exclusive to an online lead administrator that a brick-and-mortar school principal would not necessarily require to possess.
The lead administrator of an accredited, online, faith-based academy is the spiritual leader of the organization. Interviewed participants stated that the lead administrator is the one who is deeply involved in the formation and implementation of the teachers’ daily devotions in their respective classes. Students in faith-based schools are fortunate that the education they receive is both academic and theological. A lead administrator of a faith-based school bears the responsibility to impress principles for Biblical morals and values among the students and teachers.

The majority of the respondents mentioned a feeling of a deeper purpose than teaching students academic learning. Each teacher was empowered to share their own Christian experience with their students. Personalizing their relationship with Christ was modeled by the lead administrator. The modeling of a personal relationship with Christ allowed the leader of the academy to convey a sense of authenticity to the employees and students of the organization. Being the spiritual leader of the organization required the leader to be honest with the employees of the organization. Openly honest conversations about Christ and His sacrifice for each person’s life allowed the lead administrator to delve into a deeper relationship with the faculty/staff and families of the academy. Spiritual leadership is imperative in the role of the lead administrator of an accredited online, faith-based academy.

The leader of an accredited, online faith-based academy must have a knowledge of technology and financial principles. Understanding the technological inner-workings of the delivery medium is important. The lead administrator has to have a working knowledge of technical troubleshooting for two reasons. First of all, if the student has trouble with the software and/or his computer for an extended period of time, academic progress is hindered.
Secondly, the more money the institution has to spend on technology troubleshooting, the less money remaining for the religious and academic aspects of the academy.

Understanding the financial principles of the how to construct a budget is necessary. Online educational institutions often tout the advantage of flexible scheduling where a students have longer to finish a course. Another advantage of flexible scheduling is that students can enroll anytime during the school year. The disadvantage of the rolling enrollment that flexible scheduling allows is that it is difficult to project monthly cash flow. Lead administrators of online schools must be cognizant of the need to manage monthly cash flow when the organization is funded primarily by tuition and donations.

The role of the lead administrator of an accredited, online faith-based academy, although multi-faceted and challenging, is primarily about relationships. Effective communication between the lead administrator and the families of the institution is the foundation for building relationships. Understanding the cultivation of the relationships with the parents and students builds a positive school-community relationship. The ultimate relationship that the lead administrator should cultivate is the relationship as a child of God. Faith-based institutions have a larger purpose than teaching academic principles. EOA’s dual purpose is to prepare students to succeed in the workplace of today and to provide a Christian foundation for a life of service to the Lord.

**Implications**

There are several implications that arose out of the case study on the requisite skills of a lead administrator of an accredited, online, faith-based academy. The case study found that the skills required of a lead administrator of an online school are somewhat different than the required skills of the lead administrator of a brick-and-mortar school. The overarching results of
the study are an understanding of financial principles, a personal relationship with Christ and His principles, a continuously updating knowledge of educational technology and innovation, a commitment to commit to the accreditation process, and a commitment to various communications.

**Implication One from Research Results**

The results of the case study showed that a strong foundation of financial planning is required from a lead administrator of an online private-academy. The superintendent of a school district at brick-and-mortar schools usually give their building principals a budget to follow. The principal usually will have some input during the formation of the budget, but the business manager and the superintendent generally do the formation of the budget. The budgets of brick-and-mortar schools are fixed once per year unless the amount of revenue collected is behind the amount of revenue expected.

Online schools that have a rolling enrollment allow students to enroll any day throughout the year. The students have a specified amount of time to finish the coursework from the date of enrollment. The flexibility of scheduling is advantageous for the students and their parents, but it requires the lead administrator to understand the volatility of monthly cash flow.

Understanding financial principles are of paramount importance to the lead administrator. Even though the lead administrator, supposedly, will solicit the help from a financial expert, the lead administrator has to understand enough about it to ask the appropriate questions at the appropriate time.

Most educational leadership graduate degrees require a school finance class as part of the degree requirements. A single school finance course will not suffice to adequately address all the financial principles that an online private academy lead administrator must adhere to.
Understanding the budgeting factor is one facet of the financial knowledge the lead administrator must possess, but it is not the only factor. Prospective online, private academy lead administrators should be required to take a business course in marketing. A lack of comprehension in the principles of marketing will have a negative effect on the job performance of an online private school lead administrator. If the lead administrator is not proficient at marketing the organization, the budget of the organization will suffer immensely. Marketing is required to grow enrollment. Growing enrollment is necessary to sustain ample services for the Christian academy students.

**Implication Two from Research Results**

The second implication that resulted from the study is that lead administrators must be cognizant of the various forms of communication, in addition to verbal communication. Student-teacher-lead administrator interaction in an online setting requires the communication to be clear, concise, and purposeful. Online leaders must be able to use a variety of communication mediums to convey expectations to students and parents at remote locations. Purposeful communication occurs when the lead administrator makes it a point to communicate with the students via e-mail, chat, video conferencing, or some other medium. In online environments, communication does not occur by happenstance.

Marketing the academy via social media is imperative in today’s expectation of instantaneous information. Most Educational Leadership degree programs do not have a marketing course in the program of study. Private academies, especially those that are online, are required to market their institutions in order to succeed. Creativity is imperative in order to attract students from across the globe to online, faith-based institutions.
Implication Three from Research Results

The third implication derived from the case study on the requisite skills of the lead administrator of an online, faith-based (Christian) academy was the focus on the commitment to Christianity. The actions of the leadership must be consistent with the Biblical principles as they address leadership. The leader must be transparent in his or her motives in building a relationship with the students of the Christian academy. Walking with Christ daily takes incredible dedication and perseverance, but is imperative for the lead administrator to champion the traits of a Christian leader.

It was abundantly clear, in the discussions with the faculty and staff, the influence that the lead administrator has in the guidance of the students’ Christian worldviews. Each of the teachers mentioned the appreciation they had for the lead administrator’s Christian example for them to follow. The lead administrator has tremendous influence on the curriculum, both academic and religious. Inward reflection is necessary for the lead administrator to ensure that he or she is always asking that God’s will be done with regards to the academy. Deeply-rooted, unwavering allegiance to God and His principles are required for the lead administrator to be successful leading the students of the organization closer to Godly living.

The Board of Directors of any faith-based academy has a responsibility to employ a disciple of Christ as the lead administrator. Ensuring that the lead administrator is of impeccable Christian character is vital. A lead administrator that does not consult God on the major decisions is like a rudderless ship. God is the ultimate leader of any Christian school. The leader that is chosen must have the same vision and goals as God.
Implication Four from Research Results

The fourth implication from the case study is the importance of achieving accredited status for an online academy. Accreditation from the SACS places the online academy on the same academic standing as quality brick-and-mortar schools. SACS accreditation is not achieved by the organization without a concerted team effort to meet the respective benchmarks of the accrediting agency.

SACS accreditation focuses on five standards for digital learning institutions. The five standard areas are: purpose and direction, governance and leadership, teaching and assessing for learning, resources and support systems, and using results for continuous improvement. The lead administrators of online, faith-based academies must be knowledgeable of the expectations of the accrediting agency for each of the five standards.

Accreditation is important for the organization because the diploma should have worldly value. A student who graduate from the academy should not have to worry that the courses that are taken at the respective academies transfer to the college and university of the student’s choice.

Implication Five from Research Findings

The fifth implication from the case study is the ability of online administrators to be forward-looking. Online administrators must be knowledgeable of the latest academic research in online pedagogy. Communicating the latest academic research findings of online pedagogy to the teachers affords the teachers the opportunity to be successful in a virtual educational world. The lead administrators of online learning institutions have to be a life-long learner himself to effectively lead the respective organizations in the future.
Another way the online leader needs to be forward-looking is in technological innovation. Technological innovation is a major factor in the ability of the lead administrator to ensure that every teacher has the technological tools to be successful. If there is a new technological innovation that could assist in the education of the students, the lead administrator must learn as much as possible about the innovation. The teachers need to trust that the lead administrator is always examining the research and is aware of the latest educational technology advancements.

**Other Theoretical Frameworks Considered**

There were two theoretical frameworks considered for the study. The first leadership theory considered was Hershey and Blanchard’s (1972) Situational Leadership Theory. The theory was formed in 1972 and updated in 2007 (Blanchard, 2007). Thompson and Vecchio (2009) summarized Situational Leadership Theory as the prediction of an optimal style of supervision can be prescribed for given levels of subordinate maturity. Understanding the maturity of the followers is imperative for leaders who practice situational leadership.

Maturation levels of the followers, in this theory, determine the leadership style of the leader.

Situational leadership was not considered for the study due to the remote locations of the faculty and staff. Making an attempt to understand the maturation level of the employees of EOA would have been difficult with minimal benefit to the study. One of the prerequisites of the participants was that they had to have at least two years of online education experience. Each of the employees were expected to be mature members of a team.

The second theoretical framework that was considered for the study was Greenleaf’s (1998) Servant Leadership Theory. In the servant leadership theory, the leader puts serving others as the main priority of the organization. The guiding principle of the theory is that the
leader has an inherent desire to serve others first. The organization’s vision and goals are attained through the process of serving others. The ten characteristics of the servant leader are: listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of others, and building community (Crippen, 2006). If a leader possesses all of the above attributes, then he or she has the moral authority to lead according to the servant leadership theory (Zhang, Tzu-Bin & Foo, 2012).

The Servant Leadership Theory was not selected as the theoretical framework for the study because Christians are expected to be servants of God. The primary focus of the organization should be to do God’s will in everything. It is assumed that the leader of an accredited, online, faith-based academy will have strong servant hood characteristics. The lead administrator of the academy has a myriad of responsibilities. Although important, serving others is only a portion of those responsibilities. The purpose of the study was to get the total picture of what is involved in leading a faith-based, online academy.

**Topics to Address Research Questions**

Research question one addressed the characteristics of a lead administrator at a full-time, accredited, faith-based online academy in the day-to-day operation of the academy. Three themes emerged from the participant interviews regarding the research question on the leader’s day-to-day operation of the academy. The three themes identified by the participants were: effective communication, spiritual leadership, and instructional technology leadership.

First of all, the primary trait that the participants mentioned that was necessary to lead the academy on a day-to-day basis was purposeful communication. Since EOA is an online institution communication does not happen by accident. Aaron does not stop a teacher he sees in the hallway and discuss a student’s progress. All of the teachers are at remote locations. The
remoteness of the faculty requires Aaron to be purposeful in his communication. EOA’s faculty is required to video-conference with each student and family at least once per semester.

Another example of purposeful communication is Aaron’s communication with the students and their parents regarding their progress in completing the coursework. He contacts the parents if a student is falling behind where he or she needs to be. Parents along with their students are held accountable by Aaron to complete the coursework in a satisfactory time factor. Aaron’s communication with the parents and students ensures that if a student fails a course, it is not because the leadership of EOA did not address the issue throughout the school year.

The constant line of communication between the faculty, staff, and Aaron has built a teamwork mentality among the teachers in the organization. Teachers mentioned during the interviews that they feel empowered to make decisions that affect their class because of Aaron’s commitment to team building. Most of the participants exclaimed that they feel that their opinions are valued. Valuing the opinions of the faculty is one way that Aaron helps to alleviate the feeling of isolation that can occur in teachers in online situations.

Secondly, the participants stated that the lead administrator is the spiritual leader of the organization. Aaron prays daily for the faculty and staff. He also expects the teachers of the academy to pray for the academy and their students. The faculty and staff are aware of the importance of Aaron’s spiritual leadership through their participation in the bi-annual ‘Spiritual Emphasis Week’. The students, their families, and the employees of EOA are prayed for during this week. EOA’s motto of ‘Real People, Real Places, Real Ministry’ is emphasized by Aaron on a daily basis.

The third theme identified by the participants regarding the leader’s addressing the day-to-day operations of the academy was the ability to troubleshoot technical issues. Aaron took
much of the responsibility in technical troubleshooting with the students on a daily basis. His role consisted of addressing any technical problem that he could in order for the students to complete their coursework. By troubleshooting most of the technical problems himself, Aaron was able to save the academy money on diagnosing technical issues.

Research question two addressed the characteristics of a lead administrator at a full-time, accredited, faith-based online academy in the leadership of the instructional program. Although EOA has both a director (lead administrator) and a principal, both are involved in the leadership of the instructional program to varying degrees. The three lead administrator characteristics that arose from the interviews were: attention to detail, instructional/technical innovation, and curricular support.

The lead administrator must pay attention to details when leading the instructional program at an accredited, faith-based, online academy. Aaron thrived at paying attention to the requirements that the academy had to meet in order to achieve SACS accreditation. EOA was the first full-time, faith based online academy to achieve SACS accreditation. Aaron’s attention to detail was a major asset in the original SACS accreditation, and subsequent reaccreditation, process. The attention to detail characteristic serves lead administrators of online academies well.

Another characteristic that lead administrators of accredited, faith-based online academies need to possess is the commitment towards instructional/technical innovation. Some of the teachers interviewed stated that when they went to Aaron with an instructional idea, he always encouraged and appreciated the teachers’ efforts to have an avant-garde ethos. Aaron encouraged the teachers to stay at the forefront of the innovation in online education. Aaron
modeled the way in his expectation. Several of the teachers stated that they appreciated the fact that Aaron was always looking at innovative ideas in online education.

The final characteristic that emerged from the interviews and observational data of the study was that the lead administrator of an accredited, faith-based, online academy is that of a supporter of the curriculum. EOA has a principal that is responsible primarily for the instructional support. The principal stated that he was supported curricular-wise by the lead administrator going to conferences to stay current with the latest online educational pedagogy. Aaron strongly encouraged the principal to go to the conferences as well. The principal occasional went to the conferences so that he could return and support the teachers while they work on their respective curriculums.

Research question three addressed the characteristics of a lead administrator at a full-time, accredited, faith-based online academy in the leadership with regards to cultivating a positive school-community relationship. Leaders at traditional brick-and-mortar schools are expected to maintain a positive school-community relationship. Online school leaders also have to cultivate a positive school-community relationship. One major theme emerged from the participant interviews and observations. The overriding concept that all participants mentioned as being imperative to the leader’s cultivation of a positive school-community relations is the ability to build relationships.

Most of the participants discussed the policy that Aaron put in place that requires each of them to make contact with the parents and students of their respective classes at least once per semester. Aaron’s purpose behind the policy was simple. If a positive, mutually beneficial relationship existed between the teachers of the organization and the families of the students, educating the students would be infinitely more effective. It was obvious from the observations
from EOA that it is all about relationships. All of the relationships at EOA must have God as the center of the productive relationship.

Building relationships in an online environment requires the lead administrator to be purposeful in his or her approach. Aaron crafted policies to address the imperativeness of fostering a positive relationship between the academy and the home. A purposeful approach is required to initiate communication between the home and academy. Honest communication between the academy and the families of the students at EOA is required. Once trust is established, the foundation for a positive relationship is present.

The central research question addressed the requisite characteristics of a lead administrator of an accredited, faith-based, online academy. The administrator at EOA was chosen for the study because EOA was the first faith-based online academy to achieve SACS accreditation. The lead administrator has also been a successful principal at SACS accredited brick and mortar schools.

Based on the results of the document analysis, participant interviews, and observational data the overriding theme of a lead administrator’s required skill set is multi-faceted. The lead administrator is the visionary for the institution. Visionary leadership requires the leader to understand where he or she needs to be leading the organization. Since it is a Christian-based online academy, the lead administrator also has a mission to lead everyone in the organization closer to God’s will.

During the research it became evident that three characteristics were required for a lead administrator to possess to successfully lead an accredited, online, faith-based academy. The three characteristics are: effective communicator, spiritual leadership, and instructional technology leadership. The four characteristics complement each other to give the lead
administrator of an accredited, online, private academy the necessary skills to effectively lead the organization.

A Christian-education institution should have a Christian leader role model as its head. The primary focus of a faith-based institution is to provide a platform to spread the respective faith. The leader of the organization is looked upon to model the expected behavior and actions of the Christian followers. Being the spiritual leader of the organization requires the leader to be authentic. An effective leader cannot fabricate integrity in every situation.

The next characteristic that is a requirement of the lead administrator of an accredited, faith-based, online academy is a high competency of instructional technology leadership. A lead administrator is looked upon by the teachers of the institution to either improve instruction or provide the resources necessary to improve instruction. If the lead administrator is not the principal, the lead administrator is effective if he or she works collaboratively with the principal to understand the effectiveness of the teachers. The selection of LMS has a direct effect on the teacher/student learning experience in an online situation. The lead administrator’s understanding of instructional leadership is of paramount importance with regard to maintaining SACS accreditation.

An understanding of the technology is imperative as well. The lead administrator cannot hire computer technicians each time a technical problem arises. If the lead administrator is proficient in the technical aspect of the online instruction then significant money can be saved for other items for the institution. Saving money is important because in the United States a private, online, faith-based academy usually operates exclusively on donations and tuition.

The final characteristic that is required of a lead administrator of an accredited, faith-based, online academy is the ability to build relationships with people. The participants that
were interviewed all mentioned a sense of empowerment that they received as a result of the lead administrator praying for them and allowing them to make their own decisions regarding curricular issues. Prayers, valuing decision making, and constant communication are three of the factors that lead to a sense of relationship-building empowerment. Jesus came on this Earth to build relationships that led to eternal life. Online, faith-based academy leaders are well served to follow the example that Jesus gave each of us.

**Analysis of Results to the Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework for the research study was Bernard Bass’s Full-Range Leadership Theory (Bass and Bass, 2009). The theory states that although a leader has both transactional and transformational leadership styles, one style is dominant over the other. The third style of the theory, to a lesser degree, is laissez-faire leadership. According to Kirkbride (2006) laissez-faire leadership is the absence of leadership, therefore not present in effectively led organizations. The four dimensions of the transformational leadership style are idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. The three dimensions of transactional leadership are contingent reward, management by exception-active, and management by exception-passive (Judge & Piccolo, 2004). The difference in management by exception-active and management by exception-passive is the timing of the leader’s intervention. Management by exception-active leaders monitor the situation and are proactive in anticipating and avoiding problems. Management by exception-passive leaders react after the problem has occurred.

Based on the document analysis, observations, and interviews, Aaron Adams, the lead administrator of EOA exhibited several of the traits of both transactional and transformational leadership. Laissez-faire, or absence of leadership, was not witnessed during the observations or
mentioned during the interviews. Aaron exhibited more of transformational leadership traits than transactional leadership traits.

First of all, the transactional leadership trait that was present was the management by exception-active trait. Aaron continually monitors the dynamics of the organization and is proactive in addressing the observed deficiencies of the organization. If a student is falling behind in his or her coursework, Aaron would communicate with the teacher, student, and parent. All four individuals would be actively involved in the correction of the student’s academic progression. Aaron would not wait until the student failed to complete the work, as a leader who exhibited management by exception-passive traits might address the issue. Aaron was extremely proactive in his approach to the daily operations of the institution.

The majority of the leadership traits of Aaron observed during the study were transformational leadership characteristics. The four transformational leadership traits of Aaron that were identified were idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. All four of the transformational leadership dimensions were present in the discussions with the employees.

The first trait of Aaron transformational leadership style that was identified was the idealized influence. Leaders who practice idealized influence leadership have convictions about morality. Aaron is emotionally involved in the spiritual leadership of the organization. He challenges the faculty and students to continue to develop their Christian worldview throughout each and every day. EOA’s motto of ‘Real World, Real People, Real Ministry’ is a great example of Aaron idealized influence leadership skills.

Inspirational motivation was the second transformational leadership dimension that was present in the study. Inspirational motivation is a reference to the degree to which a vision is
articulated by the leader and followed by the group. The overriding leadership vision portrayed by Aaron is a spreading of the gospel of the Lord and Savior. The artifacts throughout the office and adjacent buildings verify the purpose of expanding God’s Kingdom throughout the world.

Intellectual stimulation, the third observed transformational trait, is the degree to which the leader solicits the faculty’s ideas. Aaron purposefully requests input from the department heads and teachers. Although he is the final decision maker, he does not make decisions that affect the organization without soliciting input from the appropriate persons. On a spiritual leadership level, Aaron constantly asks for teachers ideas in achieving a deeper relationship between the faculty, staff, and students of EOA and Christ.

The final transformational leadership trait that was identified during the study was the individualized consideration. Individualized consideration is the degree to which the leader listens to the followers’ concern and need. Aaron is always available to talk with or pray for an individual. The principal of EOA, Larry Newsome, emphasized the appreciation he had in the ability to talk to Aaron whenever needed. Aaron would make appointments to discuss concerns if he were unable to discuss concerns when they arose due to prior commitments.

Limitations

This study provided an examination of the requisite characteristics of a lead administrator of an accredited, online, faith-based academy. A benefit of the study is that from the interviews of the participants, observations of the office, and a document analysis of pertinent documents, a view of the daily activities of the lead administrator is available. A limitation of the detailed view of the traits required of a lead administrator at an accredited, online, faith-based academy is that the data was gathered over a three-month period. The job of the online school lead administrator might change from month to month. For instance, the observation did not occur
during the busy summer recruiting season. Examining the interactions that the lead administrator has with his team during the recruiting season could add to the list of requisite skills that are necessary to lead an accredited, online, faith-based academy.

Another limitation of the study is that only one lead administrator was studied. The lead administrator was chosen because he has experience in the online environment and experience at a brick-and-mortar school. One lead administrator was chosen because the site of the study was an accredited, faith-based online school. Accredited, faith-based online academies are not numerous throughout the United States. An overriding factor in the study was the choice of an accredited, faith-based online academy. The lack of an ample pool of lead administrators of accredited, online, faith-based academies limited the possibility of adding additional leaders to the study.

The third limitation of the study is the reliance of the data from eight participants. The data is limited by the lived experiences of those eight participants. There was a participant requirement of two or more years of experience in online educational environments. Limiting the participant pool to those with two or more years of experience in online educational environments also excludes the experiences of those employees with one year or less of online educational experience.

**Recommendations**

**Recommendations for Future Research**

A recommendation for future research is to investigate the lead administrator at a non-faith-based online school. Examining online school leaders at schools non-faith-based schools allows a greater understanding of how a leader adapts to a different set of guidelines and procedures when compared to those of the leader of an online, faith-based academy. Leaders of
faith-based schools have biblical principles that they have to adhere to, in addition to the normal school policies and procedures. The biblical principles that are the cornerstone for faith-based organizations add another facet to the lead administrator’s job responsibilities.

Investigating the lead administrator at a non-faith-based online school would allow the researcher to understand what value system guides the leader to attain the organizational goals. Faith-based institutions use the Bible as the guiding principle. How do leaders at non-faith based online schools address the organizational mission statement and goals? Moreover, what do leaders of non-faith-based online schools use to guide them in writing the mission/value statement and the goals for the organization?

Another area that should be researched further is the characteristics of the principal of accredited, faith-based online academies. The principal of academy has a different set of responsibilities that could require a different skill set when compared to the skill set required of the lead administrator. A principal communicates daily with the teachers and the students of the organization. The daily interactions between the principal and the employees and students in an online environment must be understood in order to effectively address the role of leadership in online situations.

Recommendations for Future Practice

The results of the research lend itself for two recommendations for future practice. The first recommendation is for university Educational Leadership programs to recognize the different required skill sets that leaders of online schools must possess to be successful. Most colleges and universities have a traditional Educational Leadership program of completion that consists of financial, educational, and pedagogical foundation courses. Courses regarding effective use of technology are usually absent from the respective programs.
The program of study for a future leader of an online school is of extreme importance. Traditional Educational Leadership programs tout public speaking as a major requirement of a prospective leader. Public speaking, however, in an online leadership position is not a major requirement. Communication is a major required skill in online leadership situations, but not as public speaking. Speaking to colleagues and constituents in remote locations using various technology mediums is extremely important to prospective online school leaders. Colleges and universities must recognize the importance of the different skills sets and adjust the required courses for degree completion accordingly.

The second recommendation for future practice that evolved out of this research was the need for collaboration between the leaders of traditional schools and their online school counterparts. Regional accreditation, such as SACS, gives credibility to the quality of an online education versus a traditional-school education. Leaders of each type of program must collaborate to effectively address the problems facing education in the new millennium. Lack of collaboration between the two entities, traditional school leaders and online school leaders, severely limits each group’s effectiveness, respectfully.

Business leaders and other concerned citizens have begun to ask for alternative educational methods due to the public schools’ inability to address the educational needs of the future workforce. Collaboration between the online and traditional school sector can be the beginning of a comprehensive plan to address the educational problems that plague today’s society. The availability of adequate bandwidth, along with the decreasing cost of technology, makes online education a realistic complement to traditional education situations. Effective leaders understand that all learners have differentiated learning styles. Traditional school leaders and online school leaders must recognize the differences in learning styles and collaborate to
address the issue so that in the future every child has any option available for him or her to be successful.

**Conclusion**

In closing, the job of a lead administrator of an accredited, faith-based online academy is multi-faceted, yet rewarding. The requisite skills of the lead administrator of an accredited, faith-based online academy can be categorized into three skills: communication, spiritual leadership, and technological leadership. All three of the skills encompass the characteristics that a lead administrator of an accredited, faith-based online academy exhibits in the daily operation of the school, addressing his or her role as the instructional leader, and cultivating a positive, school-community relationship.

The leader of a faith-based online academy is not only worried about what a student learns academically, but he or she is also concerned with the eternal well-being of each student. The leader’s daily actions convey the message of the organization’s mission of leading students to Christ. Accreditation audits, test score accountability, and school board relations are a few of the major responsibilities of traditional school leaders that also require a faith-based online academy lead administrator’s attention. There is no job as important to a leader of a faith-based school leader as that of leading students to Christ. The lead administrator’s ultimate evaluation of his or her effectiveness will be on Judgment Day when God says, “Well done thy good and faithful servant.”
REFERENCES


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November 22, 2013

To the Liberty University IRB:

Please accept this letter as our approval to allow Todd English to complete his case study of the characteristics of a lead administrator at an accredited full-time, faith-based virtual school. The study will be beneficial to learning more about the leadership characteristics required to succeed in a virtual environment.

The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) accredits East Online Academy (EOA). EOA was the first online Christian school to achieve such accreditation. We feel that the school is well positioned to continue to be a leader in online, Christian education. The track record, as evidenced by the first online, Christian School SACS accreditation, makes our school and leadership ideal for Todd to study.

We look forward to our relationship with Todd and Liberty University. If we can be of further assistance, please feel free to contact us.

In Christ,

Aaron Adams
Director
East Online Academy
Appendix B: East Online Academy’s Organizational Chart

- Director
  - Office Administrator
    - Assistant Office Administrator
  - Principal
    - Department Heads (6)
      - Teachers
  - Technical Support
Appendix C: Liberty University’s IRB Approval Letter

December 19, 2013

Todd English
IRB Approval 1731.121913: A Case Study of the Characteristics of a Lead Administrator of a Full-Time, Faith-Based Virtual School

Dear Todd,

We are pleased to inform you that your above study has been approved by the Liberty IRB. This approval is extended to you for one year. If data collection proceeds past one year, or if you make changes in the methodology as it pertains to human subjects, you must submit an appropriate update form to the IRB. The forms for these cases were attached to your approval email.

Please retain this letter for your records. Also, if you are conducting research as part of the requirements for a master’s thesis or doctoral dissertation, this approval letter should be included as an appendix to your completed thesis or dissertation.

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB, and we wish you well with your research project.

Sincerely,

Fernando Garzon, Psy.D.
Professor, IRB Chair
Counseling
(434) 592-4054

Liberty University | Training Champions for Christ since 1971
Appendix D: Participant Recruitment E-Mail

Greetings from Todd English, Superintendent of the Booneville School District and a Liberty University Doctoral student. I am conducting a case study of the leadership characteristics of the lead administrator at a full-time, faith-based virtual school. Your participation in the study is requested. You were selected because you have two years or more of experience in an online education setting. Please consider agreeing to participate in the study.

If you agree to participate, you will be asked interview questions regarding the characteristics that are exhibited by the lead administrator in the following three areas:

1. Managing the day-to-day operation of the school
2. Addressing the responsibility as the instructional program leader
3. Fostering positive school-community relations

The interviews will be conducted via Skype© at your convenience. Pseudonyms will be used instead of actual names. I will conduct the interviews. The utmost professionalism will be exhibited in the interview.

If you have any questions prior to agreeing to the interview, please contact me at tenglish@liberty.edu or tenglish@boonevilleschools.org.

Respectfully,

Todd English
Appendix E: Consent Form

Project Title: A Case Study of the Characteristics of a Lead Administrator of a Full-Time, Faith-Based Virtual School
Principal Investigator: Todd English
College: Liberty University
Academic Department: College of Education

You are invited to be in a research study of the leadership characteristics of a lead administrator of a full-time, faith-based virtual school. You were selected as a possible participant because of your experience in online education environments. I ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by Todd English, Doctoral student at Liberty University.

Background Information:

The purpose of this study is to determine what leadership characteristics are essential in leading a full-time, faith-based virtual school.

Procedures:

If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:
Participate in an interview that addresses the three following topics:
1. Characteristics of the leader’s managing of the day-to-day operations of the organization
2. Characteristics of the leader addressing his or her responsibility as the instructional program leader
3. Characteristics of the leader that help foster positive school-community relations

The interview will be recorded via a smartphone app for the researcher to recall the responses to the various questions to look for emerging themes. It is anticipated that you will only be interviewed once. You will have an opportunity to re-examine your responses to ensure that your answers to the questions accurately depict your intent.

Risks and Benefits of being in the Study:

The study has minimal risk: The risks of the study are no more than the participant would encounter in everyday life.

The benefits to participation are the educational realm will learn more about leadership in online school settings. Online schools are evolving into a feasible option to the traditional education program. Learning more about the leadership of such organizations will progress research in the important area.
Liberty University will not provide medical treatment or financial compensation if you are injured or become ill as a result of participating in this research project. This does not waive any of your legal rights nor release any claim you might have based on negligence.

Compensation:

You will not receive compensation for your participation.

Confidentiality:

The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely and only the researcher will have access to the records.

The data from the interview will be stored in a password protected file for the three year period required by law. The files will only be seen by me and will be kept on a computer that also is password protected. Data collected from the interviews is only expected to be used for the purpose of completing the dissertation. The interviews will happen via Skype© and will be conducted off campus. Your actual name will not be used. Pseudonyms will be used for participant names as well as the name of the site of the study. The recordings will be used for education purposes and will then be destroyed. The audio files will be deleted by a third party software that deletes files several times to ensure that it is practically impossible to recover said files.

Observational data collected will also use pseudonyms. Identifiable information will not be used in the study. The information gathered from observations will be kept in a password protected Word© document on a laptop with another password. After the appropriate time (three years), the files will be deleted using software that makes recovery of the file almost impossible.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

Contacts and Questions:

The researcher conducting this study is Todd English. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact him at 662-728-0891 or tenglish@liberty.edu. You can also contact his faculty advisor is Dr. Frederick Milacci at 434-592-6297 or fmilacci@liberty.edu.

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, Suite 1837, Lynchburg, VA 24502 or email at irb@liberty.edu.
You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent:

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

Please check the blank stating that you understand and agree that the interview will be audio-recorded for researcher recall purposes only.

Signature: _________________________________________ Date: ________________

Signature of Investigator:_______________________________ Date: ________________
Appendix F: Interview Questions

**FOR LEAD ADMINISTRATOR**

1. Describe the management characteristics you exhibit while leading a virtual school on a daily basis?

2. What are some factors that affect the daily operating of the virtual school?

3. How are the factors in question #2 addressed?

4. How are you, as the lead administrator, involved as the instructional leader of the organization?

5. How is the uniqueness of a remote faculty accounted for in regard to being the instructional leader of the organization?

6. What role do the teachers play in the development of the instructional program of the organization?

7. What are some ways you help foster positive school-community relations?

8. How are the factors of distance overcome in school-community relations?

**FOR THE PRINCIPAL OF THE ONLINE ACADEMY**

1. What is your role in supporting the lead administrator in the daily operation of the school?

2. What are some factors that affect the lead administrator in the daily operation of the school?

3. How does your role as an admissions counselor or guidance counselor support the lead administrator in his or her instructional leadership?

4. To what extent are you included by the lead administrator in the development and monitoring of the instructional program?
INterview Questions for the Teachers of East Online Academy

1. What are some of the characteristics or actions exhibited by the lead administrator that are the most effective in the daily operation of the school?

2. How do the lead administrator’s daily actions affect your daily job performance?

3. What is your role in the daily operation of the school?

4. What type of support is given by the lead administrator about the instructional program of your virtual school classroom?

5. What role do you play in the development of the instructional program of your specific classes?

6. How do you achieve effective communication with your students’ parents?

7. How do positive school-community relations affect your job performance?
## Appendix G: Observation Protocol Template

### Descriptive Notes | Reflective Notes
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**Physical Layout of the Room:**

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**Number of Individuals in Area:**

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**Notes about Individual Activity:**

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**Comments/Emerging Themes**

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Appendix H: SACS Accreditation Standards for Digital Learning Institutions

Standard 1: Purpose and Direction
The institution maintains and communicates a purpose and direction that commit to high expectations for learning as well as shared values and beliefs about teaching and learning.

Standard 2: Governance and Leadership
The institution operates under governance and leadership that promote and support student performance and institution effectiveness.

Standard 3: Teaching and Assessing for Learning
The institution’s curriculum, instructional design, and assessment practices guide and ensure teacher effectiveness and student learning.

Standard 4: Resources and Support Systems
The institution has resources and provides services that support its purpose and direction to ensure success for all students.

Standard 5: Using Results for Continuous Improvement
The institution implements a comprehensive assessment system that generates a range of data about student learning and institution effectiveness and uses the results to guide continuous improvement.