

Leadership Adaptability Within Higher Education

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Dynamism in the higher education industry (HEI) has created unprecedented complexity and uncertainty for leaders at colleges and universities across the globe. The challenges to competitive advantage and sustainability created by dynamic conditions have been exacerbated and accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic and health crisis. HEI leaders are struggling to adapt antiquated and traditionally held methods and practices to navigate the rapid changes and survive the resulting chaos. The ability of leaders to adapt to dynamism in contemporary industry conditions is influenced by the external and internal environments; in term, these leaders' capacity for change impacts the adaptability of the institutions they serve. This study examines how senior- and mid-level leaders at small private liberal arts colleges and universities are engaging in adaptive behaviors to help their organizations better compete despite challenges.

Keywords: adaptability, leadership, dynamic environment, higher education

INTRODUCTION

Leadership Adaptability Within Higher Education

The general problem addressed is the failure of leaders to adapt leadership styles and strategies during dynamic environmental conditions within HEIs resulting in a loss of competitive advantage and reduced sustainability. Marquez-Ramos and Mourelle (2016) claim HEIs operate in dynamic environments that demand adaptation of designs and strategies to achieve institutional sustainability. Khan (2017) asserts that HEIs suffer from vulnerability to dynamic environmental conditions, advocating for adaptive leadership styles that provide more flexibility and encourage members to embrace rapid change.

Hilbun and Mamiseishvili (2016) note that dynamic environments challenge HEIs to maintain competitive advantage for student enrollment and financial sustainability. Gigliotti and Ruben (2017) concur, contending that contemporary dynamism requires institutions to abandon traditional leadership conceptions, styles, and strategies to meet the demands of a diverse community of stakeholders and to achieve sustainability. The specific problem addressed is the potential failure of leaders to adapt leadership styles and strategies during dynamic environmental conditions within small private liberal arts HEIs in the midwestern US, resulting in a loss of competitive advantage and reduced sustainability.

Purpose and Significance

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

This study helps bridge the gap between the application of adaptability and the styles and strategies of HEI leaders. The importance of leadership adaptability to HEI competitive advantage and sustainability is explained as the issue relates to leadership within business administration as a field of study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

HEI leaders work in dynamic conditions that require adaptable styles and strategies for achieving competitive advantage and institution sustainability. Fumasoli et al. (2020) note that dynamic environments are a threat to foundational missions of HEI institutions as they strive to adopt strategies to improve industry position and garner additional enrollment and resources to survive. Succeeding in these conditions requires a departure from traditional leadership styles and strategies steeped in bureaucratic hierarchies long employed within the HEI.

Kleinman et al. (2018) claim that business practices at HEIs are evolving in response to influences of neoliberalism. The authors cite competition for state and federal funding and a shift in perspective of education in terms of its return on investment and contribution to the economy as factors contributing to the exploration and implementation of typical business market strategies (Kleinman et al., 2018). The authors assert that HEIs are experimenting with the fusion of historical academic business practices and contemporary private enterprise practices to test the impact on current college business models.

Gaus et al. (2020) demonstrate that successful college and university leaders assume multiple roles concurrently to address dynamic environments characteristic of the HEI, acting as role models in their positions of authority and their performance strategies. The authors claim that, as a result of complexity within HEIs, relational approaches that include collaboration and shared leadership provide best practices (Gaus et al., 2020).

Globalization, Technology, and Marketization

Globalization, technology, and marketization are contributing to more complex environments for HEIs, requiring the implementation of adaptable business models (Marquez-Ramos & Mourelle, 2016). Gaus et al. (2020) agree, noting that neoliberalism has infiltrated the HEI and has altered traditional methods of leadership, and highlighting strategies that focus on HEIs as businesses. Marquez-Ramos and Mourelle (2016) assert that HEIs are operating in dynamic environments characterized by complexity and rapid change, necessitating adaptation of designs and strategies to achieve institutional sustainability.

Traditional Leadership Styles and Strategies

Dumas and Beinecke (2018) believe that traditional models of leadership are inadequate for addressing complex and dynamic contemporary organizational environments. Doyle and Malcolm (2018) concur, citing emerging trends in HEI demand an evolution in leadership models and strategies that have historically implemented change objectives through top-down strategies. They suggest that traditional models be reimagined to address rapidly changing conditions and improve institutions' agility; they also propose consideration of a more internally focused leadership approach that assesses and adapts to the day-to-day operations of their internal environments as an emerging opportunity to facilitate change (Doyle & Malcolm, 2018).

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

and Ruben (2017) point out traditional leadership conceptions, styles, and strategies are being abandoned in exchange for developing individuals with “cross-cutting leadership competencies” who are better equipped to respond to the realities of environmental conditions (p. 101).

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

METHODOLOGY

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

Participants

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

Population

The eligible population included a subset of the 1,300 institutions within the HEI categorized by the National Center for Education Statistics as four-year, degree-granting, private non-profit, liberal arts HEIs (Hussar et al., 2020). Refining this group, the specific population was reduced and included small colleges with fewer than 2,500 students, classified as private, religious affiliations, four-year degree-granting, self-identified as liberal arts education (SPLA), and located geographically in the midwestern US. HEIs possessing these characterizations were appropriate for the research study because they have been identified as a population vulnerable to dynamic environments and because they provided an appropriate source of potential data for studying the impact of adaptable leadership styles on dynamism in the desired target group (Haberberger, 2018; Inaba, 2020).

Sampling

Purposeful sampling, which incorporates criterion, homogeneous, and critical case strategies, was the method employed for research. The collective, multi-site cases involving several participants chosen with the instrumental intent of focusing on issues of adaptability in dynamic environments offered ample opportunity and rationale for purposeful sampling.

Criterion strategies ensured that sites meet minimum criteria characterizing a particular segment of the HEI while homogenous strategies provided opportunities to focus on various leaders and leader groups as cases within each site unit. The researcher adhered to established protocol, implemented an interview guide to conduct personal interviews, and collected archive data for addressing information relevant to the research questions. Data collected was organized informally into a digital Word document, and NVivo computer software was employed to transcribe and organize personal interviews.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

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

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

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

Research question RQ1 attempted to identify and understand why leaders fail to adapt leadership styles and strategies. Corresponding sub-questions 1a and 1b sought to provide a balanced perspective of how leadership actions and behaviors contribute to or hinder their adaptability to new styles and strategies.

Assumptions

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

A second assumption was that participants involved with the research would be knowledgeable regarding the leadership styles and strategies of HEIs and would agree that contemporary dynamic environments influence existing conditions. Coleman (2019) stresses the importance of soliciting qualified participants to garner relevant and valuable research results that answer complex qualitative research questions.

Limitations

The timeframe for the study provided a limitation as research data garnered was based on participant experience with current conditions despite the acknowledgement of rapid change and uncertainty as an element of the problem. Due to the dynamism of environments and increased complexity created by unpredictable factors, contemporary circumstances possibly yielded data requiring modification to the results of this study (Theofanidis & Fountouke, 2018).

A second limitation was limited access to information due to the relatively small geographic location that could be reasonably included in the research. The limited physical scope of the study was likely not sufficient for considering unique qualities of individual HEIs and may not provide comprehensive results for adaptable leadership within the entire HEI.

PRESENTATION OF THE FINDINGS

The HEI is being targeted for the research because it has been identified as challenging, rapidly changing, complex, and in crisis (Gigliotti, 2020; Mitchell & King, 2018). One interviewee noted agreement, stating that HEI is “an industry right now clearly in a state of flux—maybe a state of distress” (#SL01-0009, 17:23).

The results are based on the 16 individual interviews conducted personally by the researcher. Participants were selected based on purposeful sampling, and an interview guide was created and employed that included six open-ended questions regarding participants’ leadership at their HEI (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Interviews were conducted in-person and via Zoom meetings. Multiple recording devices were used, identities and sites were masked, and backup copies were created (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Interviews were transcribed, and copies were provided to participants for member-checking purposes. Interviewees represent the two cases in the multi-case study; namely, HEI Senior Leadership and HEI Mid-Level Leadership.

Themes Discovered and Interpreted

The research revealed several themes among senior and mid-level leaders regarding influential factors impacting the ability to adapt to industry dynamism. Knowing how to adapt was exposed as critical. The study revealed that committed to their foundational principles, frequent and “good” communication, and consistency in execution contributed to adaptability when confronted by uncertainty and rapid change.

Leadership Commitment

The importance of leadership commitment to institutional mission and vision despite pressures to adapt was a theme identified by the research. Leaders who remain unapologetically unchanged in core foundational principles, including beliefs and practices associated religious affiliation, create security and stability for their teams. SPLA leaders participating in the research who were providing distinction for their HEIs, and as a result competitive advantage, were unwavering under pressure and embraced the principles of their religious “private” status not just in name but in beliefs and actions.

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

Leadership Communication

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

Leadership Consistency

The need for consistency was most often noted by mid-level leaders who often act as the bridge between administration (or senior leaders) and the faculty/staff at SPLA HEIs. These leaders stressed the importance of not allowing political and social pressures to distract and alter critical structures. The constancy lends stability and calm to the institutional culture and facilitates “buy-in” of proposed and implemented adapted methods and performances.

Leadership and Strategic Planning

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

Leadership and Alignment

One method for increasing leaders’ adaptability in dynamic environments is to create alignment within their organizations. This is accomplished by several means, including instituting rigorous hiring practices,

creating a supportive and collaborative culture, and, in some instances, encouraging people to pursue other occupations. Hiring practices intent on “maintaining mission identity” improve adaptability by “searching, finding, contacting, and encouraging” like-minded people to apply (#ML02-0002, 06:39). Leaders are also able to more easily adapt when they facilitate a “genuine joy in being able to collaborate” (#ML02-0004, 21:49) with followers and encourage their people to “think about how we are functioning together” (#ML02-0005, 19:35). A more recently hired mid-level leader acknowledged the challenges a lack of alignment created, stating, “I want to be fully invested but it hasn’t happened for me” (#ML01-0012, 40:05). The hesitancy of this mid-level leader resulted in a department team in which one member “struggled to connect” and “there was quite a gulf between them” (#ML01-0012, 25:16). Attempting to “match the environment with the right kind of people” is a transformational, team-building process that required one senior leader to admit (regarding current employees) “Some of them I had to remove and replace” (#SL02-0007, 03:07).

Leadership and Development

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

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

Leadership and Optimism

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

SPECIFIC RESEARCH QUESTION FINDINGS

RQ1. How Do Leaders Adapt Leadership Styles and Strategies in Dynamic Environmental Conditions?

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

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

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

RQ1. a. What Leadership Actions and Behaviors Contribute to the Potential Failure of Leaders to Adapt Leadership Styles and Strategies in Dynamic Environmental Conditions?

Findings indicated that adherence to traditional practices that target only traditional populations inhibits leaders’ ability to adapt to dynamism in contemporary industry environments. Ignoring contemporary social topics such as diversity, equity, and LGBTQ concerns rather than taking an official stance is an example of actions and behaviors by leaders hoping to “sort of tiptoe down that middle line” rather than adapt (#ML01-0012, 01:19).

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

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

Although some SPLA HEIs may not have resources to fund formal professional development on a large scale, interviewees note that there are generally opportunities to “be on committees and task forces” and become “active with local and regional organizations” that are affiliated with the institution (#ML01-0016, 23:52). These types of development are typically encouraged and supported; however, leaders who choose not to become involved deprive themselves and may, as a result, fail to adapt to changing conditions.

RQ1. b. What Leadership Actions and Behaviors Contribute to the Potential Success of Leaders to Adapt Leadership Styles and Strategies in Dynamic Environmental Conditions?

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

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

Increasing interaction and communication contributes to success in adapting styles and strategies. Consistency focused on the well-being and experience of humans that prioritized the needs and fit of all individuals at the institutions was considered to enhance adaptability. Intentionally seeking feedback and

“genuinely taking it into consideration” were noted as actions of leaders that contributed to adapting styles and strategies (#ML01-0016, 06:52).

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

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

THE CONCEPTS

Small Private Liberal Arts HEIs as Complex Adaptive Systems

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

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

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

Dynamic Environmental Conditions

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

The most commonly cited environmental challenge forecasted to impact SPLA institutions in coming years is the impending “birth dearth.” Senior and mid-level leaders noted that this condition has been attributed to the recession of 2008 in which fewer children were born. The birth dearth requires leaders to

adapt to a declining population of available college-age students for potential enrollment, with increasing competition and demanding an evaluation of facilities and programs. Interviewees concur that a demographic shift and a declining population is creating increased competition for fewer students. As one participant described this phenomenon, “the demographic cliff” for HEIs will be in 2026.

The commodification of the industry that is transforming education into a transactional good is another condition some leaders consider a “tragic trajectory from education to a big business model” (#ML01-0016, 02:54). This shift is driven by the influence of consumerism resulting from changing student and parent expectations and is creating pressures to produce employability outcomes and demands for cost containment. Unfortunately, some leaders also feel that these shifts are de-personalizing HEI.

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

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

Although not the focus of this study as an isolated condition, the COVID-19 pandemic is an environmental condition impacting and influencing every leader at every institution involved in the research study. The pandemic became the elephant in the room that needed to be addressed in order to move on to the multiple other pre-existing conditions. Most agreed that COVID escalated and accelerated the need to address items that were already becoming an issue, such as opportunities for distance learning and online quality of learning. According to Self, et al (2018) “online education at all levels has emerged as a powerful model for the future of academia” (para. 1). One mid-level leader identified a unique perspective about adapting to meet the needs of future students, suggesting the longevity of the impact of COVID from the consumer perspective: “We have a whole generation of students who will be coming who had deeply dislocating experiences” beginning in middle school. . . . “They’re going to be different” (#ML02-0003, 02:52).

HEI Leadership Adaptability

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

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

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

HEI Leadership Performance, Actions, and Behaviors

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

HEI Leadership Methods, Styles, and Strategies

Leaders recognized the need for adaptive planning strategies. Traditional strategic planning, which typically includes a multi-year process to develop a fixed 5-year implementation agenda, will be inappropriate because “there’s no way we can know what’s going to hit us” that far into the future (#SL02-0007, 09:01). Leaders concur that planning strategies will need to be broader and more flexible, and leadership styles will have to be adaptable in response to the rapid change and uncertainty in the market (#SL02-0007). Leaders and organizations unwilling to innovate methods and strategies “are the ones that eventually die” (#SL02-0007, 11:55).

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

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

Various leadership styles that were mentioned include Zeitgeist Leadership, Servant Leadership, Situational Leadership, Participative Leadership, and Collaborative Leadership. Informal observations revealed that senior level gatekeepers at HEIs are protective of their SPLA members, expressing concerns regarding workloads and stress resulting from the pandemic. Integration of servant leadership may be particularly valuable in some environments (Thacker, et al., 2019).

Competitive Advantage and Institutional Sustainability

Hilbun and Mamiseinvili (2016) assert that competitive advantage and sustainability of HEIs are more significantly impacted by the leaders’ ability to adapt than they are by the dynamic industry conditions in which they operate. SPLA institutions well-positioned to achieve competitive advantage and sustainability in dynamic industry conditions will be those with great brand recognition, good financials, and a great constituency (#SL02-0007, 08:15). Leaders who have the ability to build on and leverage those qualities will be the ones who contribute to positive outcomes and the well-being of the HEIs they serve (#SL02-0007).

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

ANTICIPATED THEMES

Balanced Approach

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

Enabling Leadership

Another anticipated theme was that leaders at SPLA institutions would have to encourage and enable organization members to embrace change and engage in the tensions created by the multiple goals of the complex systems (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018; Schulze & Pinkow, 2020). Operating in silos, as has been historically the case at HEIs, is not conducive to sustainability and is “more dangerous now than ever” because no one department or leader should assume they have all of the necessary information to make a decision (#SL01-0011, 16:55).

Adaptive Space

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

Organizational Adaptability

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

Leadership Development

The cruciality of continually developing leaders within SPLA HEIs in order to better equip them for navigating industry dynamism and organizational complexity was an anticipated theme developed from a review of academic literature (Gigliotti & Ruben, 2017; Hassan et al., 2018; Saylor et al., 2019). The findings support the anticipated importance of leadership development for navigating dynamic conditions and accomplishing competitive advantage and sustainability at SPLA HEIs. This particular theme was becoming increasingly important to the continued existence of SPLA HEIs prior to COVID-19; however, it became absolutely crucial in midst of the pandemic. Leaders need to learn and adapt skills and tools to remain relevant and employ new technologies for serving their consumers. Approaches to leadership

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

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

Summary of the Findings

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

The results of the research study confirm that the HEI is operating in a dynamic environment characterized by population declines, shifting demographics, commodification, societal pressures, government influences, and cultural changes. There seemed to be agreement among senior leaders and mid-level leaders that conditions are challenging, uncertain, and rapidly changing. The consensus among SPLA leaders is that many institutions may be forced to make hard choices in response to complex and uncertain conditions in the HEI (#SL01-0009, 34:06) Reduced pools of applicants, tuition freezes and high discount rates contribute to declining revenues that typically lead to staff and program reductions, further resulting in reduced ability to attract students and a less passionate donor pool. However, some leaders consider reductions an opportunity to improve efficiencies and establish priorities and processes that align with mission. One participant suggested that despite regretting being in a leadership position during challenging conditions, “Ultimately, I wouldn’t change it for the world” (#ML02-0003, 54:05). Another interviewee claims that SPLA leaders are “in a unique position to really remind the world again of what the core values of higher education are” (#SL01-0015, 29:53). For private institutions that are particularly faith-based, crucial components to their core values are serving and contributing to the common good: “A Christian college in the liberal arts tradition needs to address truthful ways of looking at life and what ultimately matters in forming our identity” (#ML01-0010, 06:22).

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

CONCLUSION

Application to Professional Practice

The results of this study can improve general business practices at SPLA HEIs in the Midwest and provide potential strategies HEI leaders can implement to help their institutions adapt to contemporary environmental conditions. Regarding business practices and strategies for SPLA HEIs, the research revealed that adapting status quo methods would be necessary for navigating contemporary conditions.

Improving General Business Practice

General business practices for communication at SPLA institutions, which are characterized by complexity due to the many various departments, can be improved as a result of this study. Leaders at HEIs that were experiencing success in competitive advantage and sustainability described forms of communication that were inclusive of all members of the organization, were most often physical gatherings, and occurred with frequent consistency.

Results of the study indicate that leaders at high-performing institutions were intentional about internal leadership development practices of their members. Within this research, it was noted that institutions with positive enrollment and fund-raising results had senior leaders who specifically targeted mid-level leaders with potential for development.

Research results indicate that leaders are adapting practices to generate revenue. Small HEIs that have previously relied on tuition income are being required to adopt new tactics to cover operational expenses. Tuition discounting was an initial solution for combatting the high cost of education acting as a deterrent to prospective students. This practice, which is commonly used at SPLA institutions to challenge high-cost perceptions, is not new and enables institutions to improve competitive advantage by offering pricing to parents and students that is more comparable to rival institutions. However, regarding best practices, HEI leaders recognize that discounting should be applied with caution as excessive use leads to an inability to generate sufficient tuition dollars for sustainability and does not provide long-term solutions.

Potential Application Strategies

Leaders who participated in the study confirmed the need for being flexible and adapting habitual and long-established strategies. Although the leaders interviewed agreed that change was necessary for operating in contemporary industry conditions, the findings of this study reveal a need for adaptable leadership strategies that respond and adjust to conditions but that also remain true and consistent with foundational principles and values of the institution. Leadership with a strong commitment to core values and strict adherence to mission and vision were consistent with positive institutional outcomes.

Another strategy noted by several senior leaders was adapting typical and historic methods for creating five-year strategic plans. Interviewees explained that strategic plans have historically been developed over approximately three years and implemented for five at SPLA HEIs. Leaders at the sites enrolled touted the need and benefit of accelerating the drafting process and developing shorter, more flexible strategic plans. Adapting this strategy is in response to complexity and uncertainty in the HEI industry, causing leaders to plan for multiple possible situations.

Recommendations for Further Study

Future researchers are encouraged to apply the impact of COVID-19 along with various other dynamic environmental conditions as they present themselves to analyze implications for employing CLT to manage change and uncertainty. Influence of CLT on leadership for competitive advantage and sustainability should be considered in the context of emerging conditions.

Complexity and rapid change have been conditions impacting the HEI for several years; however, the specific influence of the COVID-19 pandemic remains uncertain. Every interview participant noted the pandemic at some point in their responses. The impact of Covid-19 on leaders and their performances provides opportunities for further study.

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