Oh, You're the one That's Keeping Us Open: Senior Student Affairs officers' Crisis Leadership and Decision Making in Response to COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

“OH, YOU’RE THE ONE THAT’S KEEPING US OPEN”: SENIOR STUDENT AFFAIRS OFFICERS’ CRISIS LEADERSHIP AND DECISION-MAKING IN RESPONSE TO COVID-19

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Northern Illinois University, 2021
Dr. Carrie Kortegast, Director

The purpose of this dissertation was to understand the experience of higher education crisis leaders while facing an unprecedented crisis. COVID-19 thrust senior student affairs professionals, who most often serve as crisis leaders on small-college campuses, into the position of decision maker guiding the campus response to the pandemic. The research explored the crisis leadership experience of SSAOs during the first year of their crisis response. Five themes emerged from the data collected during the research: a) the influence of institutional structure and culture on decisions, b) uniqueness of crisis decision making, c) engagement and utilization of human resources, d) changes to professional practice/profile, and e) the emotional toll of crisis leadership. Implications for practice are offered as a result of the research conducted.
“OH, YOU’RE THE ONE THAT’S KEEPING US OPEN”: SENIOR STUDENT AFFAIRS OFFICERS’ CRISIS LEADERSHIP AND DECISION-MAKING IN RESPONSE TO COVID-19

BY

Michael R. Lango © 2021 Michael R. Lango

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

DEPARTMENT OF COUNSELING AND HIGHER EDUCATION

Doctoral Director:
Dr. Carrie Kortegast
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I would like to acknowledge my husband, family, and friends for their support and encouragement throughout this program. Without having such an incredible team on my side, I am not sure I would have made it.

I would like to acknowledge my NASPA 2018 carpool colleagues, who planted the seed in my head to pursue my doctorate while we drove through the mountains of Pennsylvania. I would also like to acknowledge Southwest Airlines for lining up Dr. Carrie Kortegast and me on the return flight from the conference. Our proximity struck up a conversation that ultimately led to the NIU program and her incredible mentorship and support.

I would also like to acknowledge our program faculty who provided international travel experiences and accompaniment, professional and personal guidance, support, and opportunities for growth and development of our identities as individuals and professionals in higher education. Finally, I would like to acknowledge the Fall 2018 NIU Ed.D. cohort. The friendships formed, depth of conversation, breadth of experiences shared, and continued support during this program were invaluable.
DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to Dr. Robert “Scott” Schmidt.
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The aim of this dissertation project was to understand the experience of crisis leadership and the decision-making process of senior student affairs officers (SSAO) responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. The multiple-case study approach researched the experiences of 11 SSAOs working at small, private colleges in the Midwest. The resulting chapters describe this research project from the proposal stage to a report on the study findings, as well as a scholarly reflection on my process and learning at the conclusion of the study.

Chapter One is an artifact from the dissertation proposal defense. The proposal was defended in December of 2020, and this chapter outlines the initial plans to carry out the research. The original conceptual framework for this study was Bolman and Deal’s (2017) reframing organizations model. As the study progressed, it became apparent that this framework was not suitable for application to crisis situations. Chapters Two and Three introduce the new framework of crisis leadership and explore the reasons it was necessary to shift the conceptual framework.

Chapter Two is a report of findings using a paper model. This chapter details the procedures that were carried out in the spring of 2021, the participants who were involved in the research, and the study findings. The findings reflect five areas that impact crisis leadership and decision making: a) the influence of institutional structure and culture on decisions, b) unique attributes of crisis decisions specific to the COVID pandemic, c) the engagement and utilization of human resources in decision making, d) changes to professional practice and campus profile
experienced by participants as a result of their leadership, and finally, e) the emotional toll of
decision making during such a prolonged crisis.

Chapter Three is a scholarly reflection on my process and learning at the conclusion of
the study. This chapter discusses changes that occurred during the research process, including a
new conceptual framework as well as a different coding process. The chapter also examines what
I learned by conducting this research that can be applied to future research and applications to
professional practice. Key take-aways include the importance of sharing scholarly research with
peers, the necessity of being clear and concise with communication, as well as the positive
impact of building strong professional and personal networks.
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Between January 1, 2020, and October 1, 2020, the word “crisis” appeared in over 381 Chronicle of Higher Education articles. The word “COVID” first appeared in the Chronicle of Higher Education on February 26, 2020, and since that date there have been over 435 articles written on the topic. It is evident that higher education institutions have encountered an unprecedented time in determining how to continue educating students while navigating a global pandemic impacting the communities in which these institutions are situated. In the spring of 2020, COVID-19 resulted in many campuses moving instruction and services online and closing facilities, including residence halls. This had a significant financial impact on institutions as refunds were processed and revenue generation came to a virtual halt.

While addressing the immediate concerns the pandemic presented, it was also necessary for colleges and universities to evaluate and plan for instruction and campus activity in the summer and fall 2020 semesters. Campus leaders around the country were asked to create re-opening plans, determine ways to mitigate the transmission risk of COVID-19 on campus, and establish policies and procedures reflecting decisions on course delivery, on-campus living, and delivery of auxiliary services. The coronavirus thrust institutions of higher education into situations and actions never before experienced. College leaders typically have the opportunity to rely on the experience and expertise of colleagues who have responded to and supported a campus during a specific time of crisis (i.e.: death of a student, natural disaster, etc.). As this was
an unprecedented and simultaneous crisis, leaders within higher education institutions were often making decisions and taking actions without being able to gain advice or guidance from peers.

Student affairs historically has been tasked with addressing student well-being and crisis response. Crisis response most often falls under the responsibility of the senior student affairs officer on campus (Treadwell, 2017). Westfall (2006) recognized that crisis management and leadership requires institutional experts in the field of student affairs. The senior student affairs officer on campus traditionally holds the role of crisis manager (Heida, 2006) due to increased engagement with students resulting from their position on campus. Professionals serving in these roles are a critical part of the students’ support network through ensuring access to counseling services, addressing behavioral issues, and being called upon for crisis intervention (Heida, 2006).

The purpose of this multiple-case study is to understand the experience of senior student affairs officers (SSAO) at small (less than 5,000 students), private, midwestern colleges who served as crisis leaders and decision makers related to the COVID-19 pandemic. At this time, research exists related to crisis leadership, but this study will focus on the crisis leadership response process to an unprecedented situation. Using Bolman and Deal’s (2017) four frames of organizational leadership as a guiding framework, the focus of this multiple-case study is upon how student affairs leaders facing an unprecedented crisis approached the situation and made decisions.

The overarching research question will focus on how the SSAOs approached the decision-making process within the context of their institutions. The guiding research questions to be investigated are:
• How did the SSAO identify priorities and resources?

• How were the decisions shaped by the culture or history of the institution?

• How did SSAO perceive disagreements and conflicts were resolved?

• How do SSAO allocate work in a time of crisis?

• How did the SSAO consider employee needs and talents while making decisions in a time of crisis?

• How did SSAO-perceived shared institutional values and beliefs guide crisis decision making?

The significance of this study is the opportunity to contribute to the understanding of crisis leadership in unprecedented situations, as well as using organizational frames to guide the decision-making process.

**Literature Review**

A review of the literature will begin by examining the definition of both the terms “leadership” and “crisis”. It will further explore both leadership and crisis in the context of higher education settings and how these settings impact these concepts. Finally, it will explain the difference between crisis management and crisis leadership and how these terms define the actions and attitudes of higher education leaders.

**Leadership Definition**

The concept of leadership has shifted throughout history. Initial understandings of leadership focused on the “great men” theory of individuals holding positions of power and how those individuals retain their power and influence others (Judge et al., 2002; Komives, 2000;
Komives et al., 2009). These initial hierarchical, leader-centric views of leadership have evolved and been replaced by contemporary definitions that often reflect a collaborative and relational effort in which both leaders and followers influence each other (e.g., Greenleaf’s servant leadership theory; Komives, 2000; Komives et al., 2009).

The challenge with providing a definitive definition of leadership comes from “a plurality of definitions and approaches” (Komives et al., 2009, p. 44) in understanding leadership, as well as different ways to measure and conceptualize the meaning of leadership (Judge et al., 2002). Gigliotti (2016) positioned leadership as a “difficult phenomenon to describe let alone define with enough flexibility to allow for interpretations and examples of a given historical moment” (p. 187). Researchers do not advocate for a universal definition of leadership because of the differing styles and types of leadership (Fairhurst & Connaughton, 2014). Komives (2000) identified leadership as a social construct wherein the “discussion of leadership often quickly shifts to a discussion of the leader or leaders” (p. 89). Modern definitions position leadership as socially constructed by identifying competencies that leaders should possess versus trying to define what leadership means (Komives, 2000).

While identifying a universally accepted definition of leadership is improbable, many researchers have put forth definitions that provide context and meaning to the word. The multitude of definitions for leadership often share key concepts. Leadership is something that individuals are able to learn (Hendrickson et al., 2013; Komives et al., 2009; Kouzes & Posner, 2019) and can come from people at any level of an organization (Gigliotti, 2020; Komives et al., 2009; Kouzes & Posner, 2019). The observable skills and abilities (Kouzes & Posner, 2019) that entail leadership result in influential acts (Fairhurst & Connaughton, 2014; Gigliotti, 2020) that
effect change (Komives et al., 2009) and influence people to adapt and face challenges within the organization and society (Bolman & Gallos, 2011; Komives, 2000; Komives et al., 2009). These inclusive leadership concepts are important to higher education because leaders are found at all levels throughout the academy and can influence both those they serve and the institution.

**Leadership as Relationship and Communication**

Modern definitions of leadership also have two recurring focal points: (a) relationship and (b) communication. New understandings of leadership as collective and relationship centered are widely accepted. Kouzes and Posner (2019) stated that “leadership is a relationship” (p. xiii), and Komives (2009) agreed with this definition as evidenced by proposing a definition that positions leadership as a relational “process that happens between people in groups” (p. 47). Leadership is also defined as collective, social, and relationship oriented (Bolman & Gallos, 2011; Hendrickson et al., 2013; Wooten & James, 2008).

Scholars explain that relationship cannot stand alone; it must be combined with communication for maximum effectiveness. Fairhurst and Connaughton (2014) incorporated both relationship and communication in their definition of leadership by stating, “Leadership [communication] is relational, neither leader-centric nor follower-centric” (p. 8). There is also recognition that leadership is a process with communication at the center and that leaders are often judged by what they communicate, how and when they communicate, and what may be missing from their communications (Gigliotti, 2016, 2020). While scholars may disagree on the exact definition and conditions of leadership, the threads of communication and relationship guiding individuals to action are consistent.
Leadership in Higher Education

Leadership takes on additional depth and nuance when placed into the context of higher education. Due to the hierarchical structures within higher education, leadership is challenged as institutions are often less flexible and can struggle to work collaboratively (Komives, 2000). Higher education leaders are best guided in decision making and communication within these structures by recognizing the importance of the history and values that define the institution (Gigliotti, 2020; Hendrickson et al., 2013). The success or failure of organizations often depend on how those in leadership roles take action and make decisions (Gigliotti, 2020).

Not only do leaders in higher education need to hold true to the values of the organization, they also must recognize the type of institution in which they work. Colleges differ based on size, religious affiliation, public versus private, not for profit versus for profit, and more (Gigliotti, 2020). Each institution requires leaders to make appropriate decisions based on these varying cultural and structural differences, as well as navigate the different demands posed by each (Gigliotti, 2020). Additionally, leaders in higher education have a variety of stakeholders with competing goals, interests, and expectations (Fortunato et al., 2018; Mitroff et al., 2006) that must be addressed through relationship building and communication.

Academic leadership is recognized as relationship centered, requiring learning and exchange with others in the academy (Bolman & Gallos, 2011). Bolman and Gallos (2011) defined success in academic leadership as those individuals who can: a) create relationships that offer clarity and facilitate work, b) develop caring and productive environments that encourage talent and cooperation, c) respect differences and respond ethically to multiple constituencies, and d) infuse everyday efforts with energy and soul. These four areas of responsibility require an
individual who can build strong relationships, is dedicated to their own continual learning
process, and will act ethically on behalf of themselves and the university.

**Crisis Definition**

Universities have been responding to situations identified as crises for decades. Recent
crisis situations vary and examples include alcohol-related deaths (e.g., Timothy Piazza), active
shooters (e.g., Virginia Tech, Northern Illinois University), the Aggie bonfire collapse, sexual
abuse at Penn State and Michigan State University, academic fraud at Chapel Hill, acts of
discrimination (e.g., Oklahoma Christian University), campus destruction resulting from natural
disasters (e.g., Hurricane Katrina), the cyber-attack on the Rutgers University network, and many
more (Gigliotti, 2020; Mitroff et al., 2006). These situations require individuals who can identify
the crisis as well as manage and lead the institution through such critical situations.

The word “crisis” comes from the Greek *krisis* meaning a "turning point in a disease, that
change which indicates recovery or death" (Etymonline.com). The Chinese language embraces
the duality inherent in a crisis by using the symbols for both danger and opportunity to create the
character for the word “crisis” (Fentress & Spencer, 2020). Distinct from an incident or situation,
a crisis is seen as both prolonged and complex in nature (Moerschell & Novak, 2020) as well as
posing a threat to the organization (Coombs, 2007; Gigliotti, 2020). Researchers have expanded
on the concept of crisis and define the term in multiple ways. There is consensus in the literature
that a crisis is unexpected (Booker, 2014; Coombs, 2007; Gigliotti, 2020; Helsloot &
Groenendaal, 2017). Both Booker (2014) and Gigliotti (2020) acknowledge that one of the
definitions that has gained acceptance throughout crisis literature comes from Coombs (2007),
who defines a crisis as “a sudden and unexpected event that threatens to disrupt an organization’s
operations and poses both a financial and reputational threat. Crisis can harm stakeholders physically, emotionally and/or financially” (p. 164).

Colleges and universities are especially susceptible to the negative consequences a crisis poses, ranging from a financial impact, reflection on the reputation of the institution, and even the physical safety of stakeholders (Booker, 2014). Gigliotti (2020) expanded Coomb’s definition of a crisis by recognizing the event as having a short response time that requires leaders to take immediate action and which could negatively impact the reputation of the institution. He also acknowledged that a crisis can test the values and mission of an organization through the actions taken to address the situation. Higher education institutions will experience a variety of crises on campus due to the variety of stakeholder engagement, the facilities comprising the institutions, and the types of services delivered. It is vital that they understand both when a crisis is unfolding as well as how to appropriately respond to ensure the vitality of the university.

A natural disaster has been used to exemplify a crisis (Fanelli, 1997; Mitroff et al., 2006). For example, a crisis resembles a natural disaster in that some are predictable, whereas many are not (Fanelli, 1997). The predictable-unpredictable nature of crisis can make planning for them difficult. Similarly, campus crises, like natural disasters, may result in a human-caused disaster where there are poor responses after the initial event (Mitroff et al., 2006). Booker (2014) outlined two categories in which a crisis can fall: (a) natural disaster and (b) human made. Recognizing the crisis category is important as leaders consider how to respond.

Human-caused crises are those directly causing a crisis or resulting from action, or inaction, by individuals in response to a circumstance (Booker, 2014). Examples of human-
caused crisis include ethical scandals (e.g., 2019 college admissions bribes), lack of oversight or planning resulting in injury or death (e.g., 1999 Aggie bonfire collapse) or communication shortcomings (e.g., lack of timely communication during an active shooter situation). These are different than natural disasters in that the leader must consider the role individuals played in the crisis and how the leader’s response can instill confidence both that the crisis is being properly addressed and in the institution itself.

Lastly, crisis can develop suddenly or over an extend period of time. Helsloot and Groenendaal (2017) described these as developing in a flash or creeping over time. A flash crisis occurs suddenly and is not anticipated, such as a natural disaster or a fire in a residence hall. A creeping crisis builds slowly over time and can often be visible or anticipated. An example of a creeping crisis would be the closure of a college due to continued low enrollment. The ability to identify a crisis is important in developing a crisis response and impacts both crisis management and crisis leadership.

**Social Construction of Crisis**

While working to define a crisis, researchers have also identified that a crisis is often socially constructed. McCullar (2011) studied the responses of higher education administrators after Hurricane Katrina and found that when stakeholders felt there was a crisis, then a crisis often existed. Stakeholders who perceive a crisis may choose to cease aligning themselves with the institution or speak about the situation in such a way as to damage the reputation of the organization (Coombs, 2007). The social construction of a crisis is subjective depending on how an individual or individuals interpret or perceive a disruption and that the “perception of crisis by others is as important symbolically as the crisis itself” (Gigliotti, 2016, p. 187). For instance,
during the racial tensions at the University of Missouri in 2015, university stakeholders viewed the events as a crisis and the university leadership was best served to label the situation as a crisis and respond accordingly (Fortunato et al., 2018).

Further explanation of the social construction of a crisis expresses that “crisis exists because of the ways formal and informal leaders and the media talk about the situation and the ways in which internal and external audiences perceive the situation” (Gigliotti, 2020, p. 30). Labeling a situation as a crisis can also become a self-fulfilling prophecy (Fortunato et al., 2018; McCullar, 2011). When leaders describe a situation as a crisis, or when stakeholders use the term “crisis” to label a situation, they have socially constructed a crisis that must be addressed.

### Crisis Management Versus Crisis Leadership

Addressing a crisis calls for both crisis management and crisis leadership. There is a distinction between these two terms that will be explored in this section, allowing for an understanding of how to define as well as exemplify each. The field of crisis management launched in 1982 following the Tylenol cyanide poisoning which took place in Chicago (Mitroff et al., 2006). In September of 1982, seven people were killed after capsules of extra-strength Tylenol were laced with potassium cyanide, resulting in a crisis throughout communities that overwhelmed hospitals and poison control centers. Johnson & Johnson (maker of Tylenol) spent millions of dollars to remove Tylenol from store shelves and find ways to mitigate the damage to their brand and company (Fletcher, 2009). The way in which Johnson & Johnson responded to this crisis was studied because of how the company was able to protect its reputation through communications and distribution of messages, as well as public relations during and following
the deaths (Mitroff et al., 2006). The ability of an organization to manage a crisis can be the
difference between institutional survival or closure.

Crisis Management

Crisis management is seen as the process by which an organization responds to a crisis. It
is seen as reactive (Booker, 2014), mechanical, and legalistic (Gigliotti, 2020) with a focus on
strategy to move the organization through the crisis (Wooten & James, 2008). Crisis
management outlines managerial actions that can be taken in a linear fashion in response to the
event (Gigliotti, 2020). The concept of crisis management is responsive in nature, outlining steps
to take once the crisis has occurred. Placed into the framework of higher education, Zdziarski
(2016) deviated from the responsive nature of crisis management by defining crisis management
as:

An ongoing process in which organizational leaders constantly scan the environment for
potential threats and risks, take actions to address the causes of a crisis event, and thereby
attempt to avert or reduce the likelihood that such an event might occur. (p. 27)

Booker (2014) acknowledged in his research that higher education is often limited in crisis
management because of its reactive nature and the creation of plans after a crisis has occurred
that only serves to provide an outline for addressing future crises of a similar nature. Higher
education institutions would be best served by following Zdziarski’s call for advanced crisis
planning and the mitigation of risk whenever possible.

The structured nature of crisis management gives way for crisis managers to view crisis
in three distinct phases: (a) pre-crisis, (b) crisis, and (c) post-crisis (Mitroff et al., 2006;
Moerschell & Novak, 2020). The pre-crisis phase is described as the regular operations of the
university that must include planning and the development of both crisis response teams and communication plans. The crisis phase is when the event occurs, and the actions identified in the pre-crisis phase are enacted. Finally, the post-crisis phase provides an opportunity to review what occurred and what actions or plans need to be changed or enhanced to address future crises. Wooten and James (2008) encouraged attention in crisis management to the cause, consequence, prevention, and ability to respond. The authors noted that the literature often omits recognition of human capital as a valued resource in each phase of crisis management planning and execution.

**Crisis Leadership**

Crisis leadership is viewed as distinct from crisis management due to the skills and attributes necessary to enact crisis leadership, as well as its proactive nature. Crisis leadership is viewed as proactive in nature where leaders identify potential crisis and lead their organization through planning and response before the crisis occurs (Booker, 2014). Placed into the context of the three phases of crisis management, crisis leadership “demands an integration of skills, abilities, and traits that allow a leader to plan for, respond to, and learn from crisis events” (Wooten & James, 2008, p. 353). Gigliotti (2020) acknowledged that crisis leadership entails individuals anticipating, preventing, responding, and ultimately learning from a crisis.

Attributes recognized in crisis leaders are charisma, strategic thinking, inspiration and compassion (Gigliotti, 2020; Zdziarski, 2016). The unique nature of a crisis is that it is often unpredictable, thus a crisis leader must be able to quickly analyze the situation and act accordingly. Gigliotti (2016, 2020) identified improvisation as an important skill for crisis leaders to develop, allowing them to respond to crisis situations as they arise. Crisis leaders must act quickly to the situations that present themselves and do so in a way where the perceived
reputation of the institution is placed second to doing the right thing to resolve the situation (Gigliotti, 2020). The challenge for crisis leaders is to act ethically and with the best interest of the stakeholders and the institution and then to determine how to message those actions without concern for optics.

Crisis leadership is also seen as a communicative process (Fortunato et al., 2018; Gigliotti, 2020) through which leaders make meaning of what has occurred. Leaders in crisis situations are recognized as sense makers (Gigliotti, 2016; Helsloot & Groenendaal, 2017; Wooten & James, 2008) who must understand communication theory and how it “allows for deeper consideration of the dynamic and complex nature of leadership in crisis situations” (Fortunato et al., 2018, p. 510). Fanelli (1997) emphasized that communication prevents a crisis from becoming a disaster through leaders appropriately communicating with the college community, board members, governance bodies, and other important stakeholders. Crisis leadership calls upon individuals to make meaning of the situation, communicate with stakeholders, and reflect that meaning in the actions and opportunities existing within a crisis.

**Crisis Leadership Communication**

Communication is seen as an integral piece of crisis leadership (Coombs, 2007; Fortunato et al., 2018; Gigliotti, 2020). Situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) provides a framework for how crisis leaders should measure the reputational risk of a crisis and outlines strategies for response (Coombs, 2007). SCCT provides an opportunity for leaders to reflect on where responsibility lies for the crisis, review the crisis history of the organization, and understand prior reputational risk while communicating with stakeholders through a crisis. Coombs (2007) created three clusters from which to respond: (a) Victim Cluster sees the
institution as a victim with little responsibility and mild reputational threat (e.g., natural disaster), (b) Accidental Cluster positions the organization as the unintentional party in the crisis with minimal responsibility and moderate risk to reputation (e.g., technology failure), and (c) Preventable Cluster expresses that the organization knowingly took or failed to take action resulting in a crisis where they have strong responsibility and severe reputational risk (e.g., violating the law; p. 168). Crisis leaders can utilize this theory and classification system to determine the cluster in which the crisis takes place and understand how communication strategies shift based on responsibility and reputational risk.

Gigliotti (2020) developed a crisis leadership communication continuum specifically for crisis leaders in higher education. Similar to Coombs, Gigliotti recognizes the importance of understanding the crisis in relation to institutional history. Gigliotti’s continuum promotes the need to incorporate the values and mission of the university in the communication process, along with a recognition of the different leadership styles and experiences of individuals across the institution when responding to a crisis. The crisis leadership communication continuum uses institutional history, values, and leadership experiences as a backdrop against which leaders should understand how to communicate as well as how their communication may be received by the organization, the external community, and stakeholders (Gigliotti, 2020).

**Crisis Leadership in Higher Education**

Crisis leadership in higher education incorporates the nuances that colleges and universities bring to these exigent situations. Placed into the context of higher education, a crisis is recognized through the risk to the institutional reputation and the danger it presents to the institutional community, including individual stakeholders, organizational composition, and
physical structures (Moerschell & Novak, 2020). While there is sparse literature specific to crisis leadership in higher education (Gigliotti, 2020), it is clear that the unique setting of higher education institutions as well as the numerous crisis situations impacting the academy require leaders who can guide the response during crisis situations.

Gigliotti (2020) developed a taxonomy to classify the various crises encountered by professionals in higher education. Types of crisis specific to higher education include: (a) academic, (b) athletic, (c) clinical, (d) technological, (e) facilities, (f) financial/business, (g) human resources, (h) leadership/governance, (i) natural disaster, (j) public safety, (k) racial/identity, and (l) student affairs (pp. 70-73). COVID-19 was a unique crisis in that it would have fallen into each of the taxonomy classifications (except possibly natural disaster) because of the broad impact it had on campus individuals and operations. Higher education, and by extension leaders within the institutions, has a duty of care for stakeholders (Booker, 2014), and this responsibility to avoid bringing harm to those engaged with the institution must be recognized during each phase of a crisis. Booker (2014) explained that crisis situations provide opportunities for individuals at varying levels within the institution to enact leadership skills due to the variety of stakeholders engaged with different departments. It is important for these leaders to understand what crises may occur and their role in responding to each crisis type within the college setting.

Colleges have been compared to small cities due to their structure, services, human activity, and (for many) physical size (Mitroff et al., 2006; Moerschell & Novak, 2020). These characteristics require crisis leaders who can understand the complexity of the institution as well as the relationships that exist internal and external to the university (Gigliotti, 2020; McCullar,
Crisis leadership in universities calls for individuals who can clearly communicate with the campus community regarding action that is needed, for individuals/departments to be responsible for taking that action, and for leaders who can collaborate across campus with colleagues, departments, and organizations to address the crisis and take the outlined actions (Gigliotti, 2020; McCullar, 2011). Central to all of this is a leader who can coordinate these efforts while not losing focus on the values and mission of the institution.

The complex nature of colleges extends to the governance structure, which can often hinder crisis response. Universities typically have a decentralized governance structure with a board of trustees, president’s cabinet, faculty senate, student government, and staff council all seeking to have a voice in the decision-making process. Crisis leadership is countercultural to this structure, as the governance structure complicates the quick response deemed necessary in a crisis situation, as well as calls upon leaders to act in the best interest of the college, and not what may be in the best interest of their specific department or representative constituency (Gigliotti, 2020). Terming a situation as a crisis (or socially constructing a crisis) allows for higher education leaders to circumvent this decentralized structure and to take authoritative actions in an expedited manner (Gigliotti, 2020).

Crisis leaders in higher education have multiple responsibilities requiring their attention during each phase of the crisis. Gigliotti (2020) emphasized crisis leaders need to align themselves and their messages with the institution, stating that “moments of organizational disruption provide an opportunity for leaders to model and reaffirm the values and principles that are most consistent with the mission of higher education” (p. 17). These leaders must recognize the relationships that exist within the institution as well as align their communication with both
the institution and the timeline of the crisis (Moerschell & Novak, 2020). Additionally, they must attend to the emotional needs of stakeholders, serving as a caretaker and comforter by responding from the heart and acknowledging the pain, loss, and healing that often results from a crisis (Gigliotti, 2016; Zdziarski, 2016).

**Student Affairs at Small Colleges**

Crisis leadership at small colleges is typically the responsibility of the senior student affairs officer, and crisis situations can have a broader impact on the college community compared to larger institutions. Small colleges were chosen as the site for this study due to the unique characteristics of these institutions allowing for a more dynamic view of the decision-making process resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. Small colleges are recognized for being mission driven (Heida, 2006) and having a deep sense of community (Lamal, 2006) among the constituents on campus, allowing for the development of strong relationships between students and the institution (Hirt, 2006; Oblander, 2006; Westfall, 2006). These institutions are recognized for having a focus on students (Bass, 2006; Hirt, 2006) reflected through the personalization and individualization of educational delivery (Hirt, 2006; Oblander, 2006). Most small universities are tuition driven (Heida, 2006; Oblander, 2006; Westfall, 2006) and are limited in the resources available to them (Lamal, 2006; Westfall, 2006) to achieve their institutional goals. Understanding these characteristics will be important to determine if and/or how these traits may have impacted decision making.

The size of these institutions has an impact on staffing that contributes to the unique sense of community and relationship on a small campus. Small colleges function with limited staff (Seagraves & Dean, 2010; Westfall, 2006), including many one-person offices (Heida,
2006; Oblander, 2006) operating on campus. Limited staffing across campus results in increased accessibility of staff to students, families, faculty, and other administrators (Oblander, 2006; Westfall, 2006). Staff on small campuses often have less formalized roles (Oblander, 2006), allowing them to accompany students as they navigate the policies and procedures that so often challenge students. The benefit of this access and flexibility in roles is stronger collaboration (Heida, 2006; Hirt, 2006; Lamal, 2006; Oblander, 2006; Westfall, 2006) across campus, supporting student success. The research proposed will allow an opportunity to identify whether these unique small-college characteristics contributed to the decision-making process.

Multiple researchers (Heida, 2006; Oblander, 2006; Seagraves & Dean, 2010; Westfall, 2006) identified that small college SSAO serve as generalists on campus with responsibility for managing student crises, emergencies, safety and health, as well as navigating legal issues that may arise from the care of students. The role of the SSAO in managing student crises is significant to this study and will be required for participation. Additionally, these professionals are often responsible for advancing multicultural and diversity efforts, overseeing judicial affairs, and supervising staff in residence life, student activities, career services, and more depending on the unique organizational structure of each institution (Heida, 2006; Westfall, 2006). The complex areas of responsibility for these individuals can serve to provide a rich understanding of the decisions that were made on campus.

Social constructions of both leadership and crisis are important to remember, as both have expectations that those who use the terms assume when applied to individuals and situations. Crisis leadership is best accomplished through building strong relationships and skillfully communicating with stakeholders. Higher education leaders charged with making
decisions would do well to recognize the nuances between leadership and management of a crisis and how the characteristics of the institution should guide their decisions.

**Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework that will be used for the study of the decision-making process of small, private college senior student affairs officers’ (SSAO) crisis leadership responding to the COVID-19 pandemic will be Bolman and Deal’s four frames of leadership. Bolman and Deal (2017) began the study of organizations in the mid-1980s before publishing their first edition of *Reframing Organizations* in 1991. The authors use four frames in which to view organizations: a) structural, b) human resources, c) political, and d) symbolic. This section will outline the foundation of Bolman and Deal’s framework, explore each frame with respect to higher education, and finally reflect on the use of this conceptual framework on the proposed study.

**Organizational Framework**

Bolman and Deal (2017) view organizations through four distinct lenses using the imagery of a factory (structural frame), family (human resources frame), jungle (political frame), and temple (symbolic frame) to express ways in which management and leadership impact and influence organizations. They outlined the distinct frames to provide a contextual understanding of organizations and further propose that successful leaders will “reframe” their work in the organization by using different frames in which to view situations, thus identifying alternate strategies to accomplish their work.

The term “frame” is used by Bolman and Deal (2017) as a way for leaders to organize the complicated decisions required of them. The authors stated, “A frame is a mental model – a set
of ideas and assumptions – that you carry in your head to help you understand and negotiate a particular ‘territory’” (p. 12). When used appropriately, a frame allows a leader to understand their work, determine how best to address situations, and develop a plan for making decisions. The plan creates a map allowing the individual to identify and organize the information and steps that must be taken.

Bolman and Deal (2017) stated that once a leader understands the four frames, they can begin to “reframe” their work. The organization of work provides leaders an opportunity to understand situational cues to guide them in identifying the best frame in which to view and approach situations. When placing a situation into each frame, a leader will have the ability to view decisions differently and contemplate the best approach to accomplish their goals. Bolman and Deal exemplify the opportunity that reframing provides by looking at a simple question in two different ways: ’What is the sum of 5 plus 5?’ The only right answer is 10. Asked a different way, ‘What two numbers add up to ten?’ Now the number of solutions is infinite” (p. 13). The recognition of multiple solutions to the same problem provides an opportunity for leaders to understand the nuances and different context each frame can provide.

**Structural Frame**

The easiest way to understand the structural frame is to use the image of an organizational chart. The structural frame views the organization as hierarchical and rule oriented (Bolman & Deal, 2017). People working in the organization can best accomplish the goals set when they are grouped together in a way that divides labor to create efficiency and specialization. A challenge for work placed into a structural frame is how to allocate work and coordinate work across the organization.
Higher education leaders will recognize the structural frame in the ways that departments and schools are organized across campus. The residence life office is structured with a leader who can oversee the specialized work of managing facilities and building communities. The challenge becomes how to engage the campus in understanding the unique work being accomplished and how residence life can partner with departments such as career development so that each can work together to address both their unique departmental goals as well as the strategic goals of the university.

**Human Resources Frame**

The human resources frame views organizations and individuals in a reciprocal relationship, exploring what each can do for the other (Bolman & Deal, 2017). Leaders using this frame recognize that organizations need an engaged workforce and that individuals need careers that provide both a salary and a fulfilling opportunity. Viewing work through a human resources frame results in understanding the harmony that must exist between the organization and the individual so that both can be successful.

Higher education leaders using the human resources lens find ways to create a highly engaged workforce that can better the organization through their energy, dedication, and recognition of contributions. Successful leaders provide individuals with professional development, opportunities to serve on campuswide committees, and the ability to advance their career, which results in a more highly functional organization.
**Political Frame**

Bolman and Deal’s (2017) political frame recognizes that leaders will find conflict, coalitions, and challenges for power within organizations. The political frame calls for managers to recognize the different priorities, values, and information existing across the organization and the need to allocate resources across the organization, recognize the ways in which individuals will take action to gain power and resources, and the need for bargaining and negotiation allowing the organization to succeed. Bolman and Deal recommended that leaders working in a political frame best accomplish their work when there are shared values and beliefs that guide decision making.

An example of how to understand work through a political frame is to consider allocation of additional staff positions at a university with limited budget. Each department leader could create a solid argument for additional staff to support their work, but the best decision is made when leaders come together and align themselves with the goals of the institution. A goal of increased retention could be accomplished by residence life and academic advising sharing a role where a position is embedded in the residence halls to provide advising and academic support to resident students.

**Symbolic Frame**

Leaders viewing their work through a symbolic frame recognize the power of imagery to express messages across the organization. Bolman and Deal (2017) placed organizational symbols into four categories: a) myth, vision, and values, b) icons or logos, c) stories, and d)
rituals and ceremonies. Symbols can be used to express organizational culture, remind individuals of what is important to the organization, create meaning, and even resolve conflict.

Convocation, university crests, and even stories of how a college was founded are examples of symbols leaders can use in higher education. For instance, a university in the Chicagoland area shares with incoming students the story of how its founder came to America by himself at 17, speaking no English but founding a religious order that has impacted the lives of hundreds of thousands of people. This story serves to encourage their students to accept challenges and boldly pursue ways of impacting society.

**Application of Organizational Frames**

Bolman and Deal’s (2017) organizational frames have been used as a conceptual framework in multiple studies, papers, and dissertations within the field of higher education. Adserias et al. (2017) used the framework to understand the best leadership style to direct institutional change related to diversity. A study conducted by Thompson (2000) used the four frames to examine gender differences in educational leaders. Studies of community college leaders have been situated in this framework by both Dever (1997) and Sullivan (2010). Dissertations have previously used the organization frames to guide their studies, including Guidry’s 2007 study of women deans leadership styles and Schumacher’s 2011 examination of the impact of shared services. Finally, both Gozukara (2016) and Reinholz and Apkarian (2018) utilized this framework in international studies they conducted looking at leadership and change. The number and variety of studies using Bolman and Deal’s framework reinforce the decision to structure this study around the four frames to understand the complex nature of a campus response to a global pandemic.
Bolman and Deal’s (2017) organizational framework aligns with the purpose of this study due to the call for viewing situations through a variety of lenses. The study seeks to understand how SSAO approached their work in the unprecedented situation of a global pandemic. The four-frame model provides a conceptual framework to understand how the organizational structure may have changed; how staff, faculty, and students may have been impacted; the level of negotiation and partnership that may have emerged; and what symbols may have been used to support decisions. The decision-making process and ways in which leaders viewed their work can provide insights for approaching crisis situations impacting the full university community.

**Research Design**

The research design that will be used to explore the decision-making process of senior student affairs officers (SSAO) at small, private colleges will be a multiple-case study supported by a constructionist theory of understanding. This section will outline the epistemological and methodological approach to the study. This will be followed by a discussion of the methods of data collection and data analysis. There will also be attention given to defining the research site and participants and an explanation of the standards that will be employed to ensure quality.

**Epistemology**

This study will use a constructionist perspective to understand the decision process of SSAO responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. The study will look at decision making in relation to an institution. Cunliffe (2008) stated that constructionist theory has become increasingly popular for researchers to understand how institutions are socially constructed. Focusing on the social and constructed aspects of institutional understandings aligns with the
conceptual framework as it also focuses on constructed and subjective understandings (Bolman & Deal, 2017). A social constructionist approach to understanding knowledge and human interactions also aligns with the definition of crisis situations guiding this study (Coombs, 2007; Fortunato et al., 2018; Gigliotti, 2020). The constructionist approach recognizes that knowledge and meaning are partial and conditional (Jones et al., 2014). This approach will guide the research in understanding the conditions that impacted the decision-making process as the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded at each institution.

Jones et al. (2014) identified that a constructionist approach understands knowledge as being created based on an individual’s interactions with others when placed into a social context. As individuals socialize with others, they develop meaning related to events, resulting in the development of knowledge about the situation (Cunliffe, 2008). Expanding on the foundation that knowledge is socially constructed, Talja et al. (2005) stated that knowledge often comes from discourse. The discourse comes from ongoing conversations that allow for the construction and categorization of knowledge for the individual which brings a situation into context. Talja et al. (2005) explained that this discourse calls on individuals to recognize knowledge is positional and must be considered from multiple perspectives. This component of the constructionist approach provides the opportunity for the researcher to understand which interactions impacted decision making as well as how societal context may have influenced the process.

**Methodology**

This study will utilize a multiple-case study methodological approach. A case study is a descriptive approach to analyzing a system or case that is bound by time and activity (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Hancock & Algozzine, 2017; Jones et al., 2014). Case study research is often
used in higher education research because the university environment and situations occurring on campus represent the definition of a case (Jones et al., 2014). A case study approach is appropriate because the study will be focusing on the response of SSAO between the spring semester of the 2019-20 academic year through the fall semester of the 2020-21 academic year. Baxter and Jack (2008) expressed that qualitative case studies provide researchers the opportunity to explore issues through a variety of perspectives, allowing the phenomenon to be understood more deeply. COVID-19 impacted the entire system of colleges, thus the case study format will allow for understandings to be developed through multiple lenses.

Case studies also use a variety of data sources (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Hancock & Algozzine, 2017) to create a richly descriptive (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017; Jones et al., 2014) understanding of the case being studied. Most importantly, Gilbert et al. (2008) noted that case studies are used as a method for the researcher to actively work with the participants to understand managerial situations. Finally, this study will use a multiple-case study method. This multiple-case study exploration will enable the researcher to explore differences within and between cases (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Analyzing data by looking at multiple cases will allow the researcher to investigate individual cases and understand the multiple variables impacting those institutions (Merriam, 2009) and then to identify patterns that may emerge across cases. Merriam (2009) identified that case study research analyzes the particulars of a specific case, creating generalizations that provide the opportunity for the case to be transferred to similar cases. This aligns with the purpose of this study to provide guidance for future senior student affairs officers facing unprecedented crisis situations.
Research Sites

The sites chosen for this multiple-case study research will be small, private higher education institutions located in the Midwest. For the purpose of this study, a small college will be defined as a college or university with an enrollment of less than 5,000 students, which aligns with the definitions provided by both NASPA (n.d., 2017) and Westfall (2006). While the Carnegie (2017) classification for a small college is between 500-1,999 students and a medium college is defined as between 2,000-4,999, the broader definition of a small college allows for more inclusion of institutions and participants in the study. Small colleges were specifically chosen due to their autonomy in institutional decision making compared to public colleges, as well as the recognition that they are less often researched.

Participants and Recruitment

The study will seek to include a minimum of 10 senior student affairs officers who held their position at the same institution from March 2019 to January 2021. The identified time frame is important for two reasons: a) they had enough time at their institution to have developed relationships with students, staff, and faculty, and b) they have had enough time to understand institutional culture. The title of the SSAO may vary among institutions (Bass, 2006; Heida, 2006) and include titles such as Dean, Dean of Students, Vice President of Student Affairs, or even Dean of Campus Life (Westfall, 2006). There is consensus that the individual’s title is less important than the recognition that the professional serving in this role has multiple responsibilities they must balance (Westfall, 2006) and a role in institutional decision making (Hirt, 2006; Oblander, 2006; Westfall, 2006). Additionally, participants must have a significant
role in providing crisis leadership on their campus. The importance of decision making in the role of an SSAO makes these participants ideal for the context of this study.

Institutions will be identified using criteria of two different membership groups affiliated with NASPA. NASPA (n.d.) supports over 15,000 higher education professionals representing over 1,200 institutions. This professional organization has created regions to recognize the unique demographics of areas across the United States. Region IV-E includes the states of Ohio, Michigan, Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin, Iowa, and Minnesota and will be the focus area for this study. Furthermore, the organization has a Small Colleges and Universities Division allowing institutions to network with colleagues from similar-sized institutions. These two groups will serve as the initial invitation group of SSAO participants. Individuals will be invited via email and those expressing interest will be asked to complete a demographic information sheet and consent form prior to their participation in the study. If the response rate is above 15 interested individuals, the demographic information sheet will be used to select professionals representing a diverse demographic group as the final participants in the study.

This study will use mixed purposeful sampling to identify participants. Mixed purposeful sampling allows for a combination of sampling measures to identify participants and aligns with triangulation of data (Suri, 2011). Stratified purposeful sampling will initially be employed through the recruitment of participants using the information provided by NASPA. This sampling method acknowledges the homogeneity of the participants while allowing for the identification of differences in the phenomenon being studied (Suri, 2011). This method aligns with this research due to the boundaries placed around participants and institutions for this case study.
Should the initial sampling method fail to provide an appropriate number of participants, snowball sampling will be employed. While snowball sampling may run the risk of expert bias, it is also seen as incredibly useful in collecting the wisdom of experts (Suri, 2011). Participants would be recruited via referral from the researcher’s professional network and individuals originally agreeing to participate in the study. The SSAO participants are experts in their field and campus, thus this method would be appropriate for identifying participants.

**Data Collection**

**Document Review**

Data collection will occur through both gathering publicly available documents and individual interviews. Document review will help to inform the case and provide background information for the interviews. Document review will occur after participant recruitment and prior to the interview being conducted. Documents, communications, and data posted on websites from the SSAO’s institution will be reviewed and tracked using a document log (Appendix A) prior to each interview. The documents will provide context for the types of decisions that may have been made and will inform parts of the interview. These decisions could include (but are not limited to) instructional method, housing accommodations, safety protocols, and tuition. The documents will include communications and data posted on institutional websites. Hancock and Algozzine (2017) provided a reminder that there will be a large amount of data collected and the identified themes need to remain focused on the research question defining this study.
**Interviews**

Semi-structured interviews will be the primary method of the data collection process. Participants will be interviewed one time for an estimated 90 minutes. A single interview was chosen recognizing the full schedule these professionals often manage that make multiple interviews likely prohibitive for engagement with this study. A semi-structured interview process will be used allowing for follow-up questions that could contribute a deeper understanding of the case being studied (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). Interviews have the advantage of allowing the interviewee to provide historical context to the case (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Semi-structured interviews also provide an opportunity for the interviewee to define the case from their own perspective, which aligns itself with the constructionist approach being used for this research (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017).

The interviews will be centered on understanding how decisions may be placed into the four frames proposed by Bolman and Deal (2017). Topics of the interview will focus on what values were used to make decisions, consideration of staff in the process, and the role of resources and organizational structure on decisions, as well as the influence of institutional culture in the process. An interview protocol will be used to guide each interview, recognizing that the questions may be adjusted for each individual case as information is discovered through the document analysis process (Appendix B) and through the course of the interview. The interviews will be recorded in both video and audio format and will be transcribed by a professional transcriber. The transcripts will then be reviewed and coded to identify themes that emerge from the data.
**Data Analysis**

Analysis of the data resulting from the interviews will be performed using both contact summary sheets and coding. Contact summary sheets (Miles & Huberman, 1994) call on the researcher to complete a reflection of their personal observations following an interview. The summary sheet provides an opportunity for the researcher to document the main themes, concepts, and questions they feel emerged from the interaction (Appendix C). This data is then compared to the codes that result from the transcripts of interviews to either confirm or contradict findings.

Coding is a process qualitative researchers often use as a way of assigning meaning to words through ongoing analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Coding of the data in this study will be accomplished through first-level, second-level, and pattern coding. Coding entails the creation of descriptive labels that create summaries of data segments (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The researcher will create an initial list of deductive codes they anticipate emerging from the data based on the conceptual framework and research questions used for this study. As data is collected, the researcher will continually review, refine, and edit the list to reflect actual data presenting itself.

Baxter and Jack (2008) identified that multiple-case study research should be analyzed within each case and then perform an overall review for coding patterns that present themselves across settings. First-level coding will be conducted within each case looking at themes and patterns to understand the case. Second-level coding will then be performed to identify themes and patterns across all cases. The benefit of this coding analysis is the identification of unique
case characteristics as well as recognizing similarities and differences that may exist across the complement of cases being studied (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

Creswell and Creswell (2018) recommend focusing on the five to seven major findings that present themselves when examining the codes across cases (p. 194). Pattern coding groups the first- and second-level codes into summaries focused on themes, explanations, relationships, and conceptual constructs that emerge from the study and can result in the major findings. Coding will end when “categories are ‘saturated’, and sufficient numbers of ‘regularities’ emerge” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 62). Coding is appropriate for this study as a recognized analysis tool for qualitative researchers but more importantly because it provides an opportunity to determine if the themes will align with Bolman and Deal’s (2017) framework for organizations.

**Criteria for Quality**

Case study research validity will be achieved through careful attention to construct validity, internal validity, and external validity measures. Construct validity concerns itself with confirming that the study investigates what it claims to research (Gilbert et al., 2008). Construct validity will be achieved through refining the research questions as data is collected to ensure the focus remains on the guiding research questions. Additionally, the data will be collected in a clear and transparent manner by recording and transcribing interviews for review and coding purposes.

Internal validity seeks to establish a cause-and-effect relationship between the collected data and the resulting themes (Gilbert et al., 2008). This will be achieved by organizing the patterns or codes that emerge from the data and using triangulation to compare and identify
multiple instances that support the findings (Miles & Huberman, 1994). External validity will be confirmed using peer review, the inclusion of rich case descriptions incorporating direct quotes from participants, and the opportunity for participants to confirm the report findings. Peer review will occur through sharing themes with student affairs professionals not eligible for participation in the study. Peer review and member checking will occur after a formal report of findings has been drafted, but prior to publication of the report, by sending the findings section of Chapter 2 of the dissertation. Miles and Huberman (1994) recognized that corroboration of findings by participants is one of the most reliable sources of validity because the participants are experts in their own experience.

Finally, meaning making will verify conclusions using themes, clustering, plausibility, and conceptual coherence. Themes and clustering will be achieved through the coding process identified for this study. Plausibility will utilize the researcher’s expertise to recognize whether the data aligns with what peers in higher education and student affairs would confirm as making sense to understand decision making. Miles and Huberman (1994) acknowledged that plausibility creates an initial sense or “pointer” (p. 246) that a conclusion is reasonable. Finally, conceptual coherence ensures that the emerging data aligns with the conceptual framework identified for the study. Conceptual coherence is important in studies using cross-case review by either confirming or recognizing conflicts with findings (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

**Researcher Positionality**

My nearly two-decade career in higher education and student affairs makes me uniquely qualified to engage in this study. I have worked at a variety of institution types including for-profit, non-profit, online-only program delivery, private, faith-based, and large public. Most of
my experience is in the field of student affairs but includes experience directing academic advising, study abroad, and international student offices, as well as serving as an adjunct faculty member. I was impacted by COVID-19 when my position was eliminated due to a multi-million-dollar deficit facing my institution. It will be important that I ensure my personal situation does not result in the coding of themes that may not emerge naturally from the data. Being absent from the campus community and the COVID-19 leadership response process does provide the opportunity for me to recognize differences in the decision process that participants may identify between the pre-COVID and COVID boundaries of this study.

**Conclusion**

COVID-19 has created a crisis for institutions of higher education. Individuals within colleges and universities are being called upon to respond to this crisis and create plans to continue meeting the goal of providing quality education while addressing the safety of stakeholders. Leadership within higher education calls upon leaders to recognize the history, values, mission, and institutional structure and culture of the organization as they meet the needs of stakeholders. Crisis leadership in higher education requires individuals to recognize the complex nature of universities, collaborate across the academy, and communicate with stakeholders, all while holding true to the values and mission of the institution. Hendrickson et al. (2013) synthesized crisis leadership in higher education by stating that “sound, authentic, creative, empowering leadership is indispensable, and it spells the difference between healthy, productive, sustainable academic institutions and programs and those that are in continual crisis, vulnerable, and failing” (p. xix).
Leaders within higher education must be prepared to learn and expand their skill set to recognize the unique ways crisis situations require action, communication, and relationship to mitigate potentially negative impacts and effectively move the institution through the crisis. This study provides an opportunity to examine the decision-making process of higher education leaders facing unprecedented situations. The study results could provide a resource for future college leaders facing crisis situations, as well as approaches to viewing situations using different frames that may provide important context to situations and assist in critical decision making.
CHAPTER 2: FINDINGS

Abstract

The focus of this multiple-case study was to understand how senior student affairs officers engaged in crisis leadership and decision making during the COVID-19 pandemic. Five themes emerged from the research: a) influence of institutional structure and culture on decisions, b) uniqueness of COVID crisis decision making, c) engagement and utilization of human resources, d) changes to professional practice and campus profile, and e) the emotional toll of crisis decision making. Implications for practice are offered.

Introduction

The senior student affairs officer (SSAO) traditionally holds the role of campus crisis leader (Heida, 2006) due to their increased engagement with students resulting from their position on campus. The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in a crisis situation unlike any other experienced by college leaders and challenged SSAOs to enact their crisis response role in ways many had never before considered. By March 2020, SSAOs across the country were being asked to lead efforts to close facilities, shape responses mitigating the transmission risk of COVID-19 on campus, determine the best ways to deliver auxiliary services, establish policies and procedures for on-campus living, partner with colleagues designing new course modalities, and more.

The coronavirus thrust institutions of higher education into situations and actions never before encountered. Higher education crisis leaders typically have the opportunity to rely on the...
experience and expertise of colleagues who have responded to a similar crisis (i.e., death of a student, natural disaster). The pandemic was an unprecedented and simultaneous crisis that impacted all U.S. colleges and universities at relatively the same time. Leaders within higher education institutions were often making decisions and taking actions without being able to gain advice or guidance from peers.

While there exists research related to crisis leadership in higher education (Booker, 2014; Gigliotti, 2020; Moerschell & Novak, 2020), this study focused on crisis leadership and decision making in response to an unprecedented situation. Distinct from an incident or situation, a crisis typically has a critical incident triggering a response that is complex in nature (Moerschell & Novak, 2020), poses a threat to the organization (Coombs, 2007; Gigliotti, 2020), and is unexpected (Booker, 2014; Coombs, 2007; Gigliotti, 2020; Helsloot & Groenendaal, 2017). The purpose of this multiple-case study was to understand the crisis leadership and decision-making process of senior student affairs officers at small (less than 5,000 students), private colleges related to the COVID-19 pandemic. The research examined how decisions were made, considerations in the decision-making process, and how this experience has changed both their professional practice and their profile on campus.

**Crisis Leadership in Higher Education**

College and university leaders respond to a wide range of crises on campus and in the community. Coombs (2007) defines a crisis as “a sudden and unexpected event that threatens to disrupt an organization’s operations and poses both a financial and reputational threat. Crisis can harm stakeholders physically, emotionally and/or financially” (p. 164). Examples of some high-profile campus crisis situations include alcohol-related deaths (e.g., Timothy Piazza), campus
mass shootings (e.g., Virginia Tech, Northern Illinois University), the Aggie bonfire collapse, sexual abuse at Penn State and Michigan State University, academic fraud at Chapel Hill, campus destruction resulting from Hurricane Katrina, and the cyber-attack on the Rutgers University network (Gigliotti, 2020; Mitroff et al., 2006). These situations require individuals who can identify a crisis as well as manage and lead the institution through them.

While identifying a universally accepted definition of leadership is improbable, many researchers have put forth definitions that provide context and meaning to the word. The multitude of definitions for leadership often share key concepts. Leadership is something that individuals are able to learn (Hendrickson et al., 2013; Komives et al., 2009; Kouzes & Posner, 2019) and can come from people at any level of an organization (Gigliotti, 2020; Komives et al., 2009; Kouzes & Posner, 2019). The observable skills and abilities (Kouzes & Posner, 2019) that entail leadership result in influential acts (Fairhurst & Connaughton, 2014; Gigliotti, 2020) that effect change (Komives et al., 2009) and influence people to adapt and face challenges within the organization and society (Bolman & Gallos, 2011; Komives, 2000; Komives et al., 2009). These inclusive leadership concepts are important to higher education because leaders are found at all levels throughout the campus and can influence both those they serve and the institution.

Leadership takes on additional depth and nuance when placed into the context of higher education. Due to the hierarchical structures within higher education, leadership is challenged as institutions are often less flexible and can struggle to work collaboratively (Komives, 2000). The success or failure of organizations often depends on how those in leadership roles take action and make decisions (Gigliotti, 2020).
Crisis leadership in higher education incorporates the nuances that colleges and universities bring to these exigent situations. Higher education, and by extension leaders within the institutions, has a duty of care for stakeholders (Booker, 2014) and a responsibility to avoid bringing harm to those engaged with the institution. Colleges have been compared to small cities due to their structure, services, human activity, and (for many) physical size (Mitroff et al., 2006; Moerschell & Novak, 2020). These characteristics require crisis leaders who can understand the complexity of the institution as well as the relationships that exist internal and external to the university (Gigliotti, 2020; McCullar, 2011). Central to all of this is a leader who can coordinate these efforts while not losing focus on the values and mission of the institution.

**Student Affairs at Small Colleges**

Crisis leadership at small colleges is typically the responsibility of the senior student affairs officer, and crisis situations can have a broader impact on the college community compared to larger institutions. Private colleges and universities often have more autonomy in decision making compared with public institutions. Multiple researchers (Heida, 2006; Oblander, 2006; Seagraves & Dean, 2010; Westfall, 2006) identified that small-college SSAOs often serve as generalists on campus with responsibility for managing student crisis, emergencies, safety and health as well as navigating legal issues that may arise from the care of students. While the specific title of the SSAO varies among institutions (e.g., Vice President for Student Affairs, Dean of Students), the SSAO often has multiple responsibilities they must balance (Westfall, 2006) and a role in institutional decision making at the highest levels (Hirt, 2006; Oblander, 2006; Westfall, 2006).
Small colleges are recognized for being mission driven (Heida, 2006) and having a deep sense of community (Lamal, 2006) among the constituents on campus. This often allows for the development of strong relationships between students and the institution as well as a sense of community (Hirt, 2006; Oblander, 2006; Westfall, 2006), thus creating a bond among campus stakeholders. These institutions are recognized for having a focus on students (Bass, 2006; Hirt, 2006) reflected through the personalization and individualization of educational delivery (Hirt, 2006; Oblander, 2006). Most small universities are tuition driven (Heida, 2006; Oblander, 2006; Westfall, 2006) and are limited in the resources available to them (Lamal, 2006; Westfall, 2006) to achieve their institutional goals. Understanding the characteristics of small colleges and universities is important to understand decision-making processes at these campuses.

**Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework that guided this study was crisis leadership. Crisis leadership is recognized for the skills and attributes necessary for an individual to lead an organization through a crisis. Attributes recognized in crisis leaders are charisma, strategic thinking, inspiration, and compassion (Gigliotti, 2020; Zdziarski, 2016). The unique nature of a crisis is that it is often unpredictable, thus a crisis leader must be able to quickly analyze the situation and act accordingly. Gigliotti (2016, 2020) identified improvisation as an important skill for crisis leaders to develop, allowing them to respond to crisis situations as they arise. Crisis leaders must act quickly to the situations that present themselves and do so in a way where the perceived reputation of the institution is placed second to doing the right thing to resolve the situation (Gigliotti, 2020). The challenge for crisis leaders is to act ethically and in the best interest of the stakeholders and the institution and then to determine how to message those actions in a way that
stakeholders can understand the actions and their alignment with the values and mission of the college.

Crisis leadership is also seen as a communicative process (Fortunato et al., 2018; Gigliotti, 2020) through which leaders make meaning of what has occurred. Leaders in crisis situations are recognized as sense makers (Gigliotti, 2016; Helsloot & Groenendaal, 2017; Wooten & James, 2008) who must understand communication theory and how it “allows for deeper consideration of the dynamic and complex nature of leadership in crisis situations” (Fortunato et al., 2018, p. 510). Crisis leadership calls upon individuals to make meaning of the situation, communicate with stakeholders, and reflect that meaning in the actions and opportunities existing within a crisis.

Crisis leadership in universities calls for individuals who can clearly communicate with the campus community regarding actions that are needed and the individuals/departments responsible for taking that action and for leaders who can collaborate across campus with colleagues, departments, and organizations to address the crisis and take the outlined actions (Gigliotti, 2020; McCullar, 2011). The complex nature and governance structure of colleges and universities can often hinder crisis response. Universities typically have a decentralized governance structure with a board of trustees, president’s cabinet, faculty senate, student government, and staff council all seeking to have a voice in the decision-making process. Crisis leadership is countercultural to this structure as the governance structure complicates the quick response deemed necessary in a crisis and calls upon leaders to act in the best interest of the college, not what may be in the best interest of their specific department or representative constituency (Gigliotti, 2020). Terming a situation as a crisis (or socially constructing a crisis)
allows for higher education leaders to circumvent this decentralized structure and to take authoritative actions in an expedited manner (Gigliotti, 2020). Additionally, they must attend to the emotional needs of stakeholders, serving as a caretaker and comforter by responding from the heart and acknowledging the pain, loss, and healing that often results from a crisis (Gigliotti, 2016; Zdziarski, 2016).

Methodology

This study utilizes a multiple-case study methodological approach. The multiple-case study approach enables the exploration of differences within and between cases and viewing issues through a variety of perspectives, allowing the phenomenon to be understood more deeply (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Analyzing data by looking at multiple cases allows for the investigation of individual cases, the understanding of how numerous variables impacted those institutions (Merriam, 2009), and the identification of patterns that emerged across cases.

A case study approach was appropriate because the study focuses on the response of SSAOs between the spring semester of the 2019-20 academic year through the spring semester of the 2020-21 academic year. Small colleges were chosen as the site for this study due to the unique characteristics of these institutions allowing for a more dynamic view of crisis leadership and the decision-making process resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. COVID-19 impacted the entire system of colleges, thus the case study format allows for understandings to be developed through multiple lenses.
Participants

The study includes 11 senior student affairs officers. Seven participants identified as women and four as men. Ten of the participants identified as White or Caucasian, and one participant identified as African American. Their titles varied and included Vice President for Student Affairs and Dean of Students, Vice President for Student Development and Dean of Students, Dean of Students, and Vice President of Student Life, but all were considered the SSAO at their institution and had a significant role in providing crisis leadership on their campus. In order to participate in this study, they had to have been in their positions prior to March 2019 and held the position until at least January 2021. The identified time frame was important for two reasons: 1) they had enough time at their institution to have developed relationships with students, staff, and faculty, and 2) they had an understanding of the institution’s culture prior to the start of the pandemic. Pseudonyms were assigned and the title of “Dean” was used to help enhance confidentiality.

Data Collection and Analysis

The primary form of data collection was through semi-structured interviews, with the review of publicly available information serving as a secondary data source. After receiving IRB approval, participants were recruited through both email invitations sent to professionals identified by NASPA (Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education) as meeting the research participant criteria, as well as additional direct email solicitations. Once participants were identified, a review of documents, communications, and data posted on their institutional websites was conducted to help inform individual cases and provide background information.
prior to the interviews. The email communications, COVID dashboards, and videos of townhall-style meetings provided context for the types of decisions that were made as well as a timeline to understand decisions and campus communication.

Each participant participated in a semi-structured interview that lasted between 60-90 minutes, and interviews were conducted between mid-January to mid-February of 2021. Interview questions covered topics related to priorities and values that guided their decision making, how the structure and culture of their institution impacted decisions, and the impact of decision-making on them personally and professionally. The interviews were recorded in both video and audio format. Contact summary sheets (Miles & Huberman, 1994) were completed following each interview, recording initial reactions and observations. The summary sheets provided an opportunity to document the main themes, concepts, and questions that emerged from the individual interviews and to compare this information with emergent themes after data coding.

Once the interviews were transcribed, coding of the data began. An initial process of double coding (Baxter & Jack, 2008) was conducted in which an initial coding of the data was completed and then “after a period of time the researcher returns and codes the same data set and compares the results” (p. 556). The first round of double coding was conducted using deductive coding, and the second round of double coding was accomplished through inductive coding. The data was first analyzed within each case and then compared across cases looking for themes and patterns to understand the case. Finally, pattern coding was completed, grouping the codes across all cases into summaries focused on themes that emerged from the study and resulted in the major findings. The benefit of this coding analysis was the identification of unique case
characteristics as well as recognizing similarities and differences that existed across the complement of cases being studied (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

**Trustworthiness**

Case study research validity was achieved through careful attention to construct validity, internal validity, and external validity measures. Construct validity concerns itself with confirming that the study investigates what it claims to research (Gilbert et al., 2008). Construct validity was achieved through refining the research questions as data was collected to ensure the focus remained the guiding research questions.

Internal validity was achieved by organizing the patterns or codes that emerged from the data and using both triangulation and member checking to identify multiple instances that support findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Miles & Huberman, 1994). External validity was confirmed through peer review, the inclusion of rich case descriptions incorporating direct quotes from participants, and the opportunity for participants to confirm the report findings through member checking. Miles and Huberman (1994) recognized that corroboration of findings by participants is one of the most reliable sources of validity because the participants are experts in their own experience. Finally, meaning making verified the conclusions using themes, clustering, plausibility, and conceptual coherence. Plausibility utilized the researcher’s two decades of higher education expertise to recognize that the data aligned with what peers in higher education and student affairs would confirm as making sense to understand decision making.
Findings

There were five themes that emerged related to decision making: a) uniqueness of COVID crisis decision making, b) influence of institutional structure and culture on decisions, c) engagement and utilization of human resources, d) changes to professional practice and campus profile, and e) the emotional toll of crisis decision making. COVID-19 required crisis leaders to engage in an expediency of decisions related to a breadth of responsibilities across campus as the pandemic had a pervasive impact on all areas of the university. Institutional structure and culture guided the decision process as crisis leaders navigated governance structures, embraced the deep sense of community and relationship on small colleges, and considered the residential focus on the campus in their decisions. SSAOs’ crisis leadership was supported by the expertise of a broad array of individuals on campus, highlighting the importance of relationship building across campus. The crisis leadership responsibilities required of the SSAO resulted in an elevation of their professional practice as well as their profile on campus with individuals and departments that did not previously recognize the contributions made by these professionals. Finally, the persistent nature of the crisis has resulted in SSAOs identifying feelings of anxiety, stress, and exhaustion.

Uniqueness of COVID Crisis Decision Making

Though COVID-19 was a topic of conversation on participants’ campuses as early as January and February of 2020, all of the SSAOs discussed how quickly decisions had to be made once it was declared a public health emergency within their state. By mid-March, they were quickly responding to the insidiousness of the crisis, including campus closures and subsequent
decision making required of them. The prolonged nature of the pandemic resulted in distinct phases of crisis decision making to address the impact COVID continued to have on campus and in the community. Dean Anton shared that in the first phase of the crisis “you had no idea what was going to happen in the next hour… I’ve never seen anything in my life escalate so quickly.” Dean Schmidt stated, “I mean, it was the most pervasive kind of crisis with which I've ever dealt in terms of its institutional reach.” SSAOs indicated that responding to the pandemic was different than how they have responded to other campus-related crises. Deans Mary Ellen and Earnest discussed the need to be more “decisive” and “direct” in their decision making.

As the crisis escalated in the spring of 2020 and campus facilities started to close, SSAOs had to make decisions on how, when, and what to communicate with the campus community. SSAOs used email and web-based meeting technology and launched websites to communicate their decisions. However, the quick evolution of the crisis caused a problem with communication. For instance, Dean Katie said that early in the pandemic, communication of information was “different all within that same week. Folks, depending on which one [web-based information session] they went to and which group they were a part of, heard slightly different information as the week progressed, and that caused confusion.” In an effort to be consistent regarding information and communication, Dean CHL said, “Whatever information we send out to students, I'm going to turn around and send that same information to parents and families, and I'm going to send it to the entire [university] community.” Participants indicated that communicating good and consistent information early in the pandemic was difficult because conditions were changing quickly.
The summer of 2020 was the second phase of the crisis when participants discussed being busy forming committees, reviewing options, and making a wide breadth and amazing number of decisions they felt were in the best interest of the health and safety of the campus. Fall 2020 was a distinct phase of implementing the decisions that were made, adjusting to new information and outbreaks that required changing or making new decisions, and observing other institutions to learn from their experiences and best practices. Finally, decisions made for the spring 2021 semester were more data driven, informed by regional and national professional organizations, lessons learned from their own decisions made earlier in the year, and required SSAOs to continue making decisions and either confirming or changing their plans.

Participants also discussed the importance of and commitment to doing what Dean CHL identified as “what is right.” She expressed, “We have a board [of trustees] that [said], Spare no expense here, and we'll figure out the expenses part on the back end.” Making decisions that prioritized health and safety were echoed by other participants. Dean Schmidt shared, “We are not a wealthy institution and that definitely impacted decisions… [However,] when I said. ‘We need to be able to have the healthcare we need,’ nobody ever suggested otherwise.” The focus on doing the right thing without immediate concern of impact or optics provided SSAOs confidence to make decisions that prioritized the safety and health of the campus community.

Influence of Small College Culture and Structure

Institutional structure and culture of small colleges was a salient theme that emerged within and across each of the cases. SSAOs identified that the small size of the schools made decision making during a crisis easier because there was less bureaucracy. This allowed for centralizing decisions required in the fast-paced onset and development of a crisis. Dean Skelton
shared, “Because we're so lean as a small school, it was a lot easier for us to pivot and pivot quickly… We don't have the layers of bureaucracy.” The small institutional size was prominent in the decision process of participants and recognized as an overall benefit.

Participants discussed that since they had a seat on the president’s cabinet, their position aided in quick decision making. Dean Roberts shared how the limited layers at his institution aided the decision and action process:

I report directly to the president and I sit in the cabinet…my voice was pretty loud, and it gave me a lot of leeway and a lot of authority to do things that if it wasn't this structure I might have to go through two or three people to get something done.

The ability to directly influence and own the decisions being made resulted in efficiency to advance the initiatives and actions resulting from those decisions.

Each participant discussed the importance of community and relationships as it related to the culture of small colleges. Dean Roberts shared with his colleagues, “We’re in this together. We’re doing this because we love this institution, we love our students, we love each other.” Similarly, Dean Wingo stated, “I have felt very fortunate to be able to work with some really solid campus leaders and friends and colleagues who put a lot of time into this and said, ‘We're all in this together.’” That sense of community provided SSAOs the ability to make decisions knowing that, as Dean Skelton stated, “we’re a small place, we know everybody, we care about each other, people will step up.” The relational nature of small colleges provided decision makers with the confidence to make decisions that would be supported by their colleagues across campus.

The structure of the institutions was also essential to decision making. In particular, participants discussed not only being a small college but also a highly residential campus. The
residential aspect highly influenced decision making as they needed to balance student needs with community safety. Dean Schmidt shared, “We had students who for a variety of reasons being home and continuing their education are mutually exclusive.” The decisions around the residential experience also brought light to the breadth of medium and small decisions that were required following each major campus decision. For example, Dean Ward discussed having to think through what would happen if the residence halls stayed open and the dining halls were closed. This raised questions such as how were they going to manage food delivery, ordering meals, and how the campus was going to manage the increase in trash as students are eating and cooking in the halls? Ultimately, the residential aspects made decision making more complex but were central to maintaining the identity of the campus and experience students sought.

Participants who worked on a trimester system found this structure beneficial and provided greater flexibility to pivot. Dean CHL shared:

You had some schools who were on a semester system, and so they had to make decisions for their whole semester. We were only making decisions [for] about ten weeks. We were quite fortunate in that sense because we could really have a wait-and-see approach; let's wait and see what other schools are doing before we need to make a determination.

Similarly, Dean Ward highlighted that the trimester schedule provided additional time to make decisions. She shared, “The long winter break gave us time to continue to monitor and figure out, ‘What are we going to do?’ That may work to our favor, depending on vaccination rates and the behavior of the virus.” Across the cases, the structure and culture of the small colleges and universities shaped how decisions were made as well as how those decisions were carried out.

One component of the culture SSAOs found challenging during this crisis was that of participatory governance. In crisis situations, decisions must be made quickly and decisively
(Gigliotti, 2016). Participatory governance is a time-consuming process that often runs contrary to crisis situations. Dean Roberts talked about how participatory governance needed to change on their campus: “There was a time when we just had to say, ‘We're just going to have to break this cycle.’ Because the committees can't meet, they can't make decisions quickly even if they did meet.” Dean Katie also experienced this challenge on her campus: “We're an institution based on participatory governance, and so lots of folks think they should have a say in every decision, and sometimes that's not totally possible and not always realistic and not appropriate.” This move away from participatory governance and inclusion in decision making was evident throughout the data as SSAOs recognized the decisive and quick decision process in which they needed to engage.

**Engagement and Utilization of Human Resources**

Participants frequently discussed staff and faculty whom they identified to assist in their decision making. Multiple participants discussed how they capitalized on faculty expertise in virology, biology, and other science fields to build and confirm the testing and tracing plans for their campus. Dean Ernest shared, “We have a faculty member in our Biology Department…that met with our director of the Health Center to walk through [our plan] and she was like, ‘This is going to be fantastic.’ Participants talked about leveraging individuals’ expertise to assist with COVID-related needs. For instance, Dean Ward’s campus had a strong outdoor education program and she was able to capitalize on the risk management knowledge of these individuals and retrain them as COVID care coordinators. She also recognized that the staff in alumni relations and advancement had experience in event management which she could leverage to assist in on-campus testing as students returned to campus. Across the board, participants
provided multiple examples of how they engaged and leveraged the experience and talents of the campus community in both the decision-making process as well as implementing decisions.

While some roles directly lined up with emerging campus needs, SSAOs also had to identify work that was above and beyond individual roles and make decisions about staff reassignments. Dean Borgealt explained, “We were trying to help everyone realize it's everybody's job now. We're all going to help to do these things, and we need to fill in different gaps.” The needs of the campus community resulted in staff taking on new responsibilities and roles outside of their specific positions. Dean Skelton shared that the director of Human Resources took over coordination of meal distribution for students in quarantine and isolation. Dean Wingo trained staff working in study abroad programs to become lead contract tracers, while Dean Borgealt identified staff on campus with “bandwidth that could help” with new tasks as their roles shifted without students physically on campus. Participants weighed the new responsibilities with the individuals on campus to ensure execution of plans was successful.

When asked about prior professional development regarding crisis decision making, participants struggled to identify any specific professional development provided to them. Dean Borgealt reflected, “There was really no training provided to us to make effective decisions.” Dean Ernest stated, “As it relates to decision making, none. No professional development.” Dean CHL recognized that this experience provided her an opportunity to deliver professional development to her staff. She stated, “I have not done that for others, but it’s interesting because now I know I need to” provide professional development on crisis decision making. Professional development centered on decision making for SSAOs and their teams was absent and could have hindered or delayed their crisis response.
Changes to Professional Practice and Profile on Campus

The leadership and decision making provided by participants impacted their professional practice and profile on campus. SSAOs reported an increase in their confidence to make expansive decisions impacting areas beyond student affairs. Dean Mary Ellen shared, “I will say that it has taught me to have confidence in the broader perspective outside of the scope of student affairs.” Similarly, Dean Anton stated, “Personally, I have a lot more confidence in my decision making.” Over half of the participants expressed increased confidence in their decision-making abilities since the beginning of the pandemic.

Participants discussed their decision making become more collaborative and inclusive. Dean Borgealt shared, “Because I was learning so much as I went along, I was probably even better at consultation and inclusivity in decision making than maybe I had been in the past.” Similarly, Dean Schmidt stated that “this has been a really powerful example of needing multiple people who are looking at something from multiple lenses, and then again, looking for opportunities to bring other people in.” While being collaborative was not a new skill set for participants, how and whom they collaborated with expanded during the pandemic. Dean Skelton explained:

I like to think that I was always a collaborative person, but I think everyone on cabinet would say that we still probably operated in silos and made a lot of decisions in vacuums without necessarily consulting to see how they would affect the rest of campus. We don't do that anymore.

The broad impact of COVID-19 on all areas of the campus required crisis decision makers to engage with campus colleagues with whom they may not have previously worked or developed relationships on which they could capitalize.
Most participants indicated that their role in decision making during this crisis resulted in an increase to their professional profile and visibility on campus. Dean Mary Ellen shared:

There was always this culture before this like, “Oh, student development,” people would say this at meetings, “You guys plan bingo nights and pizza parties.” Totally offensive... and now they're like, “Oh, you're the one that's keeping us open.”

Participants spoke about speaking to academic departments, campuswide presentations outlining their decisions and plan implementation, as well as being called upon to answer multiple questions during conference calls with the community, including those on and off campus. Dean Roberts shared, “I think my leadership capability is really apparent to them now. Now they see me in ways they didn't see me before as like the real deal with leadership.” Participants identified that the leadership role they played in the crisis response exposed the campus community to see their professionalism, expertise, and abilities in a way they may not have recognized previously.

**Emotional Toll of Crisis Leadership**

A noticeable theme emerged reflecting the emotional toll that decision making had on participants as the pandemic persisted. Dean Schmidt talked about the anxiety of decision making and how “it all felt so really scary.” She shared an experience towards the end of summer 2020 when she called a trusted colleague at their institution to discuss feelings of stress and anxiety becoming overwhelming:

I called her, and I burst into tears, and I think for a good three, four minutes. It felt like forever, but I'm sure it wasn't. She just was on the other end of that phone listening to me sob. I'm saying, “I'm just terrified that all of this is for nothing. We have done all this work, and we have turned ourselves inside out for nothing. We're going to get here, and it's all going to fall apart. It's going to be hell in a hand basket, and we're going to be sending them home.”
The stress of constant decision making and the lack of previous experience that could have provided confidence in the decisions they were responsible for resulted in SSAOs experiencing high levels of stress and anxiety.

Participants also reported feelings of fear in the decisions they were making. SSAOs were asked to make the “best” decision for the campus with very limited information. As Dean Roberts shared, “Make the best decision you can without a lot of data in an area you have no experience with. That's like super scary.” Similarly, Dean Ward shared, “I'll say this has been hard, to try to remember that this has been such a sustained moment of uncertainty and fear… it requires an enormous amount of just human being management because of the fear.” They recognized that the success or failure of the response they developed may have a long-term impact on the institution and the weight of that responsibility was challenging for many participants.

Participants reported feeling exhausted by the number and breadth of decisions that needed to be made. Dean Mary Ellen shared, “We were working every day, all through the weekend, all night, late into the evenings. During that time, I remember telling our president, I'm overwhelmed. This is a lot.” Other SSAOs identified feelings of being “burned out” (Dean Mary Ellen) and “exhausted” (Dean Anton). These feelings of exhaustion could be attributed to the longevity of the crisis and the need to continue making decisions through the different phases of the pandemic. Participants identified that the spring 2020 semester, as Dean Schmidt stated, “was like drinking out of a fire hose,” where information was coming in so quickly and decisions were required without time to be deliberative or inclusive. Basically, as Dean Ernest stated, “I think in March it really was, ‘How do we get to the end of the semester?’” In the summer of 2020 there
was, as Dean Roberts shared, “no downtime for anybody who was working on this stuff. There was no summer break.”

The prolonged nature of the pandemic took an emotional toll on participants. The fast-paced and continuing evolution of this crisis meant that these leaders were finding themselves in a reiterative process of decision making which added to the feelings of exhaustion expressed by participants. Dean Anton stated, “We made a decision seven times” as new information came in and time elapsed. Dean Earnest echoed this challenge: “Even when you are making a decision, you may have to revisit it because now the guidance is 10 days, it’s not 14 days.” He went on to share the challenge of the open-ended nature of the COVID crisis:

When you have a fire or you had an assault or you have those things that we often deal with, there’s an end to them. A survivor of an assault is still working with that, but you wrap the case up or you have the conduct piece, and there's closure. Fire, the fire is out, and we've rebuilt. With this thing, the light at the end of the tunnel either gets smaller or moves further away every time. I think that's certainly a challenge through it.

Unlike other crises, the pandemic lingered and created ongoing and new decisions as the pandemic evolved.

The enduring nature of this crisis resulted in participants not having the time to reflect on the experience and how it has impacted them both personally and professionally. More than half of the SSAOs commented that this study was the first time they had taken time to think about their decision process, their role, and how the experience has impacted them. Dean Mary Ellen commented, “I feel exhausted and traumatized in some ways, even thinking through these things today.” She went on to reflect:

I don't remember a lot of this. It's almost like a little bit of trauma that I probably have played out in the back of my mind, not to dramatize—you know, make it dramatic—but it does feel a little bit like that was so much that I don't even remember it. It feels hazy, even though it wasn't that long ago.
The number and breadth of decisions participants have been responsible for during the duration of this crisis has impacted the emotional health and well-being of those in the crisis leader role on their campus.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to understand the experience and decision-making process of SSAOs responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. There were a number of unique components of decision-making that emerged from participants as they considered their work in the first year of the COVID-19 crisis. Two of the biggest distinctions of the COVID-19 pandemic was that this crisis has been both prolonged and pervasive. SSAOs serving as crisis leaders have typically responded to crisis situations that have a short duration (Gigliotti, 2020) and impact specific areas of the campus community. The pandemic required an ongoing crisis response from campus leaders as infection continued, guidance changed, and plans for responding to the evolving pandemic were continually refined. The crisis had also impacted every area of the university community, including course delivery, residence life, auxiliary services, and student life. Historically, few campus-level crises have affected nearly every aspect of the institution as well as multiple institutions at the same time.

Crisis leadership through the pandemic has provided SSAOs an opportunity to showcase the competencies Wooten and James (2008) identified for successful leadership in a crisis. Those competencies include effective decision making, communication, managing multiple constituencies, and developing human capital (Wooten & James, 2008). SSAOs exemplified those competencies through this crisis in the decisions they made, the communication efforts
undertaken, and the management of multiple plans and individuals to enact the campus response efforts. Gigliotti (2016, 2020) indicated improvisation is an essential skill for crisis leaders. This was apparent in the leadership provided by the participants who developed plans and made decisions while facing an unprecedented situation with little guidance or previous experience to inform their decisions.

Participants shared that the small-college context was a benefit to their decision-making process. The multiple responsibilities that small-college SSAOs balance in their roles (Westfall, 2006) served participants well as they made decisions reacting to the multiple priorities required in developing their pandemic response due to their understanding of the interconnectedness of the campus community. The sense of community and relationship within a small college (Lamal, 2006) benefited the SSAOs through their ability to understand the skills of individuals on campus to support decisions, as well as knowing the commitment of colleagues to both students and the institution. The lack of multiple bureaucratic layers within a small college supported the participants in quickly taking action on the plans they created to mitigate transmission and protect campus constituents from unnecessary risk.

While participatory governance was suspended, allowing for a more expedient response to the crisis, this suspension should not been seen as a threat to participatory governance. Participants reported that the multiple constituencies across campus understood and agreed to the temporary suspension in recognition of the need to make immediate decisions in the spring of 2020. Additionally, SSAOs were mindful to continue communicating and collaborating with different colleagues across campus to reflect their inclusion and influence in decisions related to
the pandemic response. Many cases returned to participatory governance during the summer and fall semesters when there was an opportunity for time and inclusion in decision-making.

Small-college budgets are overwhelmingly tuition driven (Oblander, 2006). Participants were highly aware of the costs the decisions they were making, such as closing residence halls and moving to online education, had on the financial health of the institution. While the decisions made impacted the finances of these tuition-driven institutions, their decisions were often made in the best interest of students and in accordance with public guidelines. The limited resources (Westfall, 2006) available to small colleges capitalized on the sense of community and relationship to navigate the crisis situation as it unfolded. This sense of community was communicated to constituents by the SSAOs as a guiding force underscoring many of their decisions.

The emotional impact on participants of providing leadership during this prolonged crisis was similar to the findings of Treadwell’s (2017) research on leadership following campus disasters. She indicated that “SSAOs experiences with campus tragedy were defined by: an immediate uncertainty and ongoing fear…personal impact, and incidental learning” (pp. 48-49). Treadwell’s (2017) findings of exhaustion, guilt, challenges with meaning making, and the long-term impact on the personal lives of crisis leaders are clearly reflected in the experiences of the SSAOs leadership in the first year of the pandemic. The suddenness and uniqueness of the pandemic resulted in uncertainty and anxiety around decision making; fear for themselves, their families, their colleagues, and the entire campus community; and an impact on the wellness of participants.
Reflection is an important part of the decision-making process, and the prolonged nature of the COVID-19 pandemic has not given participants much opportunity to step back and consider all that they have experienced and accomplished. The lack of cogitating on this experience was not unique to these participants. Treadwell (2017) also recognized that SSAOs responding to crisis situations had an “inability to fully process the experience” (p. 49). Compassion fatigue was seen in individuals who serve those experiencing traumatic situations and was best combatted by attending to one’s self-care (Jackson Preston et al., 2021). Crisis leaders’ external focus on supporting the campus community often came at the expense of their individual wellness. SSAOs are best served by ensuring they have a support network and deliberately identifying space to process their emotions and practice self-care.

This study extends the understanding of crisis leadership to focus on the process and impact of decision making on those leading the response during a prolonged and unique crisis. The findings reflect the need for SSAOs to reconsider the decisive nature of decisions often expected in a crisis but to be open to changing and revisiting decisions as the crisis evolves and extends across both campus and the academic calendar. Additionally, crisis leaders’ commitment to building authentic relationships is essential to making informed decisions as well as receiving personal support, as decision making during prolonged crisis has a direct impact on their well-being.

**Implications for Practice and Future Research**

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted institutions and crisis leaders as this crisis extends into another year. SSAOs’ decision making benefited from recognizing the structure and culture of their organization and how these influences could strengthen and support their
decisions. Small colleges’ sense of community and relationship was vital to the success of navigating a crisis situation. Thus, findings from this study iterate the importance of SSAOs in developing and fostering relationships with a broad range of community members, not only because it is good practice, but because it is also important in crisis management. Recommendations to assist in community preparedness in crisis management might include professional development opportunities on crisis leadership as well as tabletop exercises that include not only college stakeholders but both local and state officials.

The nuances of crisis decision making call for SSAOs to be more direct and decisive, communicate their decisions with clarity and transparency, and remain focused on doing the right thing first and considering how to message it second. The campus community will be looking at crisis leaders to calmly address the crisis by making decisions with confidence and in alignment with the college’s mission and values. An area of opportunity for professionals is to engage in professional development on how to make effective decisions. Exploration of theories and best practices in this area can increase confidence and impact their future decision making. Communicating the decision and the process of how that decision was made is also a vitally important component of the decision-making process. Developing clear communication plans and protocols ahead of a crisis would help in assuring good and clear information is shared with community members and other stakeholders.

Colleges have a plethora of individuals with backgrounds and experiences that can support decision making during a crisis. The small-college environment allows for the development of meaningful relationships where SSAOs can learn about both the academic and personal experiences that can assist them with decision making and leadership during a crisis. An
example of knowing colleagues beyond their academic acumen can be found at a small, private university in the Midwest. A faculty member in the Theatre Arts Department teaches courses in set building and lighting. This faculty member also wrote a book on grief, bereavement, trauma, and victim resources following the murder of his son. This faculty member’s experience and expertise could have been valuable to the SSAOs in making decisions about the campus response but also how to manage the emotional toll of responding to a crisis.

SSAOs who build authentic relationships with faculty and staff are best served to pause and consider who should be included in helping reach decisions. The decisions made during the pandemic benefited from the academic and professional experiences of individuals who could inform and support decision makers. SSAOs’ decision-making efforts could be benefited by using Gigliotti’s (2020) Taxonomy of Crisis Types in Higher Education (pp. 70-73) to consider the manner of crisis that may impact their campus and working to identify and build relationships with campus colleagues whose expertise can expedite and strengthen the crisis response for each type.

Crisis management is reflected in the professional competency areas for student affairs educators (ACPA & NASPA, 2015) under the Organizational and Human Resources (OHR) competency (p. 24). While crisis management is reflected in the OHR competency, the concept of crisis leadership is not included, nor is crisis leadership incorporated as a proficiency in the Leadership competency (ACPA & NASPA, 2015). SSAOs identified as crisis leaders on their campuses should receive robust training to develop their proficiency in crisis leadership. Professional organizations supporting SSAOs should provide additional professional development opportunities in this area recognizing the importance and impact of individuals
serving as the campus crisis leader and the reliance upon these professionals to make sound decisions.

SSAOs serving as crisis leaders must be aware of the emotional toll that decision making can have on them. Self-awareness allows for individuals to recognize the impact this role can have on them and identify actions they can take to center and care for themselves. Identifying a colleague who can serve as a resource provides a space where decision makers can authentically discuss feelings of fear, exhaustion, isolation, and anxiety without concern for how their ability to lead through the crisis may be viewed by others.

This study provided numerous opportunities for future study. Three areas identified include: a) the long-term impact that centralizing student affairs during this pandemic has on how the field is viewed by institutional colleagues, b) the impact of large institutional change occurring during a crisis, and c) how the Incident Command System offered by FEMA can serve as a model for crisis leadership and response. SSAOs were conflicted regarding views on how/if the student affairs profile on campus may be impacted by the leadership they provided during this crisis. A longitudinal study may provide context to understand any lasting change. Three of the cases in this study were undergoing either an institutional review resulting in structural changes to the campus or experiencing significant leadership changes. Further study could examine how these changes impacted crisis leadership and relationship development on campus during the crisis. Finally, one case used the Incident Command System and identified the strong value it provided to their crisis response.
Conclusion

COVID-19 challenged small-college SSAOs’ crisis leadership continually in the first year of the pandemic. These crisis leaders’ decision making required new ways of responding to a crisis as the pandemic was exceptional in breadth and enduring nature. SSAOs successfully navigated the trials faced by capitalizing on their institutions’ unique structures and cultures, adapting their professional experience in crisis response to meet the inimitable demands of COVID, and capitalizing on the resources available to support and inform their decision making. The result of their work over this past year has provided them an opportunity to showcase their leadership, talent, and abilities to the campus community. It has also taken an emotional toll due to the fear, anxiety, exhaustion, and uncertainty of responding to a global pandemic. Senior student affairs officers should be recognized for the remarkable work they have done, provided with professional development opportunities to support their continued growth in crisis leadership, and afforded the space and resources to address their self-care and emotional health resulting from the enduring stress they have experienced.
CHAPTER 3

SCHOLARLY REFLECTION

I remember HESA 702-Philosophy of Postsecondary Education as being the first class in my doctoral program. The major project for this course was our first (of many) literature reviews, and we were encouraged to select a topic that we might consider for a dissertation. I selected the professional development of student affairs administrators as my topic and explored how professional development has changed and new areas of professional development for administrators currently in the field. As our doctoral program evolved, so did my interests and areas I wanted to explore for possible dissertation topics. I considered access issues for Latinx students while I was working at a Hispanic Serving Institution, as well as how White administrators can work to improve the retention of Black students when I noticed an equity gap while working at a large, public university. In March 2020 COVID-19 impacted higher education in ways nobody could have imagined, and I became fascinated with how crisis leaders and student affairs administrators were making decisions responding to this unprecedented situation. I selected crisis leadership and the decision-making process of administrators as my dissertation topic and began the work to research this timely and important concept.

Dissertation Process Reflection

The formal title for my dissertation is *Oh, You’re the One That’s Keeping Us Open: Senior Student Affairs Officers’ Crisis Leadership and Decision Making in Response to COVID-19*. The aim of my research was to explore how decisions were made by senior student affairs
officers (SSAO) responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. SSAOs most often serve in the role of a crisis leader for their campus and are required to make decisions guiding the response to crisis situations. SSAOs have previously had the benefit of relying upon colleagues or professional organizations to understand and explore best practices when responding to a specific crisis type. COVID-19 was a global pandemic that required leaders from across the country to begin making decisions and formulating a crisis response without the benefit of best practices from their professional networks or a full understanding of the depth and breadth of the crisis that was unfolding. I was interested in understanding how these individuals approached the decision process, what guided or influenced their decisions, and how they felt their decision making in response to COVID-19 was impacting and shaping themselves and the field of student affairs.

The original conceptual framework selected for this study was Bolman and Deal’s (2017) reframing organizations model. Bolman and Deal view organizations through four distinct frames: a) structural, b) human resource, c) political, and d) symbolic. They outlined the distinct frames to provide a contextual understanding of organizations and further propose that successful leaders will “reframe” their work in the organization by using different frames through which to view situations, thus identifying alternate strategies to accomplish their work. After completing the interviews and examining the data, it became apparent that this conceptual framework did not lend itself to recognizing the important nuances of crisis decision making. The conceptual framework that best aligned with this study is that of crisis leadership.

Bolman and Deal’s frames are useful for overall decision making, but crisis decisions require different considerations. Crisis decision making requires leaders to make decisions that are in the best interest of the organization and constituents, thus there is no space for political
maneuvering and bargaining as identified in the political frame. While the structural and human resources frames were reflected in making crisis decisions, the relationships required in the human resources frame must be built prior to the crisis, and not during or as a response to the crisis.

Prior to beginning my data collection, I drafted my interview questions and was encouraged to conduct a practice interview with someone that would fall outside the participant parameters for this study. I found this exercise to be incredibly valuable. Not only did it allow me to practice interviewing and get comfortable with the technology I would be using, but more importantly it provided insight into the questions I had prepared. The test interview helped me recognize that some of my questions were worded to be too specific, preventing the participant from expanding or providing information that I may not have anticipated; some questions were not in the right order, making the interview feel disjointed. The practice led me to craft some closing questions that explored the personal and professional impact of being a crisis decision maker during the pandemic.

I conducted semi-structured interviews with a total of 11 SSAOs from small, private colleges located in six different states across the Midwest. The interviews averaged just over an hour and were guided by questions aligned with the conceptual framework for the study. I then took the transcribed interviews and conducted deductive coding based on a code system that I had developed prior to beginning the interview process. After reflecting on the data and themes that emerged from the deductive coding, I struggled with aligning the codes with the experiences and insights that I heard from the participants. I set the coded transcripts aside and began anew by engaging in inductive coding with each of the transcripts. The inductive coding process
resulted in richer themes that captured the essence of what I was hearing from the decision makers.

I believe there were two reasons why the inductive coding process was more productive than the deductive coding process. The first was the constraints of the deductive coding which used the original conceptual framework of Bolman and Deal (2017) to create the codes. While reviewing the transcripts I often felt that I needed to code answers a specific way or fit them into a box that they may not authentically fit in. An example would be when I recognized the high level of anxiety and stress that was being experienced by SSAOs. The human resources frame of Bolman and Deal’s reframing organizations model was the frame that most closely aligned with emotional challenges, but the frame and theory never discuss emotions in context with the frames. When I switched from deductive coding I was able to create a code reflecting the emotional toll of crisis leadership. Inductive coding resulted in themes that better resonated with the SSAO experience and that I felt authentically represented the data collected during the interviews.

The final step in the process was to review the contact summary forms that I completed after each interview. These were an incredibly valuable resource that I would highly recommend to qualitative researchers. These forms required me to immediately formulate and compose my thoughts about individual cases following each interview. After conducting so many interviews over the course of more than a month, the cases can commingle and you may forget something important that you heard during the conversation. These forms helped in three distinct ways: a) they triggered my memory about important points of each conversation, b) confirmed the themes that emerged from the coding process by serving as a reference point to see if that theme was
notable at the time I completed the form, and c) aided me in keeping track of concepts that fell outside the scope of this study but could serve as topics for future study.

Five themes emerged from my study: a) influence of institutional structure and culture on decisions, b) uniqueness of crisis decision making, c) engagement and utilization of human resources, d) changes to professional practice and campus profile, and e) the emotional toll of crisis leadership. A challenge for me with the themes was seeing only two of the four frames chosen in my original conceptual framework (human resources and structural) clearly represented in the resulting data. I considered whether I had chosen the wrong conceptual framework for this study perhaps I had missed important information in either the interviews or coding process. Ultimately, I decided that I had not missed information in the interviews or coding but that the conceptual framework selected was not appropriate for this study. I do not believe that Bolman and Deal’s (2017) framework was created for an application to crisis decision making, thus crisis leadership became the new conceptual framework for this study.

There were six questions that initially guided the research. The questions were each aligned with one of the frames of Bolman and Deal’s (2017) model and also supported the need to change the conceptual framework. Research questions that focused on priorities, disagreements or bargaining, and the allocation of work did not provide a depth of understanding to the decision making and crisis leadership in which SSAOs were engaged. The sole priority for campuses was the safety of stakeholders; there was no bargaining taking place as the community embraced a “do what needs to be done” mentality, and the small-campus community found people stepping up to take on additional work to successfully respond to the pandemic. The
initial research questions were each answered as a result of the study, and the construct validity of the study was achieved as questions were refined or added contributing to the study findings.

If I were going to conduct this study again, the thing that I would change would be to broaden the scope of the data collection. I feel that even when I tried to keep participants focused on their decision making, there were times when individuals wanted to talk more broadly about their experience, the challenges they faced, the emotional toll they felt, points of pride in themselves and their teams, and the impact this had on their department, division, and university. I often had to remind myself of a statement that I read about qualitative research recognizing that you will uncover a lot of information through the process and will constantly need to remind yourself to stay focused on the purpose of your study and not all the interesting or unique things that will be discovered outside of that scope.

**Application to Professional Practice**

The dissertation process has impacted my practice in numerous ways, including recognizing the importance of a support network, understanding the importance of sound research, providing context and language to professional concepts, and finally, identifying ways to incorporate the themes of my research in my professional practice. The participants in my study reflected the need to have a strong support network as they faced the challenge of responding to the pandemic. They spoke about the benefits of having professional colleagues they could contact to discuss decisions they were making, as well as having a personal network to help ease the pressure they were under. Personally, I found that having both a network of peers within the doctoral program and a network in my personal life has been invaluable as I
have moved through this process. They have helped to shape my research, encouraged me when I have struggled, and given me the support to get to the end of this program.

This process has changed how I engage with research. It has strengthened my ability to examine a variety of sources, consider new information, and formulate opinions. I recall attending conferences and dismissing individual’s research because it had a small number of participants. This process has helped me to understand the limitations of conducting large qualitative research and the validity of the themes that emerge from studies with small sample sizes. It has aided me in critically reading and reviewing research to better understand the process and outcomes of studies. Finally, it has given me the tools to gather information and identify themes that emerge, helping me to prepare a position or support a decision I make.

The dissertation process was important for me as I considered and researched concepts like leadership and crisis and discovered a framework for making decisions. While interviewing for positions in the field of student affairs, inevitably I have been asked about my leadership style. Having completed this research and this program has given me the language to talk about my leadership in ways that I was not able to put into words previously. I can speak to my views of leadership as inclusive, authentic, and transparent. It has also helped me to discuss how leadership within higher education must take into account the structure of the institution and the importance of relationships and communication within leadership. I can support these views by the research that I conducted as part of my literature review process.

The concept of decision makers using the four-frame model by Bolman and Deal (2017) has been invaluable. I interviewed for a position with a university and used this approach to answer some of the questions about creating a vision for the department and how I would spend
my first couple of months in the role. I also used the frames to ask questions helping me understand the organization. I was offered the position, and I am confident the frames will continue to serve as a strong reference point in my professional practice, reminding me to fully analyze and understand situations and decisions that I make.

Finally, this research will be useful to my professional practice in leading my department and university through future crisis situations. Experiencing a crisis is inevitable, and the findings from this research will provide me with additional skills useful in responding to the situation. I have a stronger understanding of the need to build meaningful relationships outside the division, the role communication plays in decision making, and the need for self-care during and following the crisis.

Application to Research

I found that writing a journal article was more difficult than conducting the research. The word limit placed on the article, along with the requirements of expressing the components of the research, resulted in having to make difficult decisions about what to include and omit from the article. The research process resulted in an abundance of rich data, and it was a challenge to condense the information into the constraints of the word limit for the article.

I learned that it is important to be clear and concise about the purpose of your research. It is vital to be direct in expressing the findings resulting from your research, as well as critically analyzing your data to propose meaningful recommendations for professional practice. Finally, I learned that you need to research the journal you choose for submission and follow the guidelines they provide to be considered for publication.
After completing my research I recognize two things: a) the large amount of information that is gathered during the process and b) the importance of sharing your research with others. I was surprised at the list I created for possible future studies resulting from my research. While I was focused on the decision process, my research uncovered opportunities to study issues including: a) any long-term impact or change to student affairs resulting from the pandemic, b) will the relationship or culture between academic affairs and student affairs shift due to the partnerships that were created during the crisis response, c) how senior administrators manage and create relationships when there are changes to the university leadership team and individuals are working remotely, d) how crisis leaders balance and respond to multiple yet unique crises occurring simultaneously (i.e., responding to COVID-19 and social justice protests occurring on campus as a result of a police-involved shooting in the community), and d) how the Incident Command System provided support to and confidence in the crisis response of a campus. All of these topics resulted from my research and helped me to recognize how much information may be omitted from others’ published studies as well as how one study results in so many options emanating from the original topic to continue pursuing research.

I also believe that this process has impressed upon me the importance of sharing what we have learned with others. So many colleagues have completed their dissertations and talked about how exhausted they were when they completed their program and that their research never went any further than their bookshelf. This process has helped me to recognize the importance of sharing the wealth of knowledge produced from dissertations and research to reinforce the rigor and validity of our field, as well as the personal and professional development opportunities for individuals reading this research.
Conclusion

The dissertation process has been something I have been incredibly grateful to be engaged with over the past year. Losing my job as a result of COVID was a big hit to me personally and professionally. I have been working since I was a teenager and had my own paper route. I worked throughout college and have never been without a job. Losing a job in a field that I love and feel is my true calling was a blow and made me question my ability to be successful or contribute to higher education. Engaging in research, conducting a study, connecting with peers and professors, and being encouraged to publish have given me a focus during a time when I have often felt unfocused. This process has allowed me to critically examine my skill set, my interests, and my desire to remain within higher education. I have learned so much from this process both academically and personally, and I am so thankful to have had this in my life when I needed it the most.
REFERENCES


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**Notes:**
Interview Protocol

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study, and for allowing me to interview you as part of my research. This study is designed to examine the decision-making process of senior student affairs officers (SSAO) facing an unprecedented situation. I am particularly interested in how you made decisions in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on your institution.

Your information will be kept confidential. A pseudonym will be used in place of both your name as well as the name of your institution throughout the study. If you haven’t already, would you like to choose the pseudonyms that will used for yourself and your university, or would you like me to assign them on your behalf?

I want to express my appreciation for your willingness to participate in this research. You have the right to withdraw participation in this project at any time. You will be sent a draft copy of the final report for your review and comments. You have already signed and sent me your consent form. Thank you for doing that in advance of our meeting. Do you have any questions about the consent process?

Do you have any other questions about this study before we begin?

Themes and Representative Interview Questions
(Many of these questions would be edited to address decisions identified during the document analysis process or from initial responses resulting from the COVID-19 section.)

Warm Up Questions:
• How long have you been in the field of Student Affairs?
• Can you share your path into the field and to your current role/institution?
• How long have you been in your current role?
• What is your favorite thing about your job?

COVID-19 Questions:
• When did you first hear about COVID-19?
• What were some of the initial decisions you were responsible for related to COVID-19?
• What was the hardest decision you were involved in making because of COVID-19 impacting your campus?
  o Was that process different from other decisions you were involved in?

Political Frame Questions:
• Reflecting on the decisions that we discussed, what were the priorities you focused on in your decision-making process?
• What were some of the values that guided your decision-making?
  o How did you communicate shared values across your division/the institution?
• What resources did you require to implement your decisions?
Were those resources new, or repurposed from other areas of campus?
What bargaining or negotiation took place for you to acquire those resources?

**Structural Frame Questions:**
- How did the structure of your institution either support or hinder your decision making?
- Were any areas within the university restructured (increase of staff, decrease of staff, or staff reassignment) in response to COVID-19?
  - How were those decisions made?
- How was work coordinated or assigned across the institution?

**Human Resource Frame Questions:**
- Which campus colleagues did you most often work with to make and implement decisions?
- What opportunities did you provide for staff engagement in the decision-making process?
  - What committees or task forces did you create to guide and/or implement decisions?
  - How were individuals selected to participate in these committees, or to engage in different work to support decisions?
- What professional development or training was provided to yourself and your staff related to COVID-19 to aid you in making effective decisions?

**Symbolic Frame Questions:**
- Tell me about the culture of your institution that informed your decisions?
- What were the institutional values that guided your decision-making?
  - How are those values communicated across the institution?
- What were some of the symbols, themes, or institutional stories you may have reflected upon while making your decisions?

**Closing (select some/all based on time available)**
- How was your decision making different from SP’20 to FA’20?
- How do you think your decision making has changed as a result of your work responding to the pandemic?
- How has the campus seen you as a leader differently now than before COVID?
  - How about Student Affairs?
- Is there anything else related to your decision-making process that we have not discussed that you would like to share?
- Do you think that your experience responding to COVID-19 has changed how student affairs (or yourself) are viewed on campus?
- What recommendation(s) would you have for future leaders who may find themselves in a similar situation?
- Is there anything else related to your decision-making process we have not discussed that you would like to share?
APPENDIX C

CONTACT SUMMARY FORM TEMPLATE
Contact Summary Form

Today’s Date:

Date of contact:

Contact with:

Contact conducted via:

What were the main themes that stood out from this contact?

What were similarities you noticed with other contacts?

What were differences you noticed from other contacts?

Summarize information you gained related to the four frames of organizations:

       Human Resource –
       Political –
       Structural –
       Symbolic –

What stuck out to you about this contact?

What questions arose that should be considered for inclusion with future contacts?