RURAL ILLINOIS COMMUNITY COLLEGE PRESIDENTS' RESPONSE TO COVID-19

by

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ABSTRACT

The emergence of the COVID-19 global pandemic had a prolonged and comprehensive impact on executive leaders across all levels of higher education. This research study aimed to shed light on the lived experiences of eight rural Illinois community college presidents during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. The purpose of this research was to identify and understand leadership experiences and competencies that emerged at the intersectionality of where normal operations and situations of prolonged crisis converged. The methodology for this descriptive research study was a phenomenological qualitative research design aimed at gaining an understanding of the lived experiences of eight rural Illinois community college presidents selected from a purposive sample across two Illinois Community College Board peer groups.

The data collection for this study utilized in-depth interviews, which were coded for themes centered on leadership competencies that emerged during the prolonged crisis. By examining the lived experiences of eight rural community college presidents, the researchers were able to identify six key findings that highlight the importance of prior training and access to a diverse set of fiscal, technological, and human resources critical to adaptive leadership during periods of crisis response for rural institutions. Other findings highlighted components of decision-making during crisis response spotlighting safety, communication, and institutional climate. Additionally, the work-life balance along with the social-emotional response of the leader played key roles in a leader's ability to adapt during periods of prolonged crisis. These

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findings indicate the need for bolstered financial and technological resources for leaders in

rural-serving districts, along with clear communication from external resources to help support

the leader with the decisions throughout the duration of a prolonged crisis. Other

considerations for leaders include the well-being of stakeholders, effective communication

strategies, and the need for close engagement with boards and other community stakeholders.

KEY WORDS: crisis, pandemic, rural, community college presidents, competencies, leadership

DEDICATION

We wish to dedicate the completion of this dissertation to all our friends and family who provided us with endless support and encouragement throughout this journey. Thank you for giving us many reasons to keep developing, continue learning, and the recognition to realize that life is only as fulfilling as the people we have in it. We share this achievement with you all.

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From Shelley: I would like to thank my colleague and friend, Curt Oldfield, for sharing this unique and rare opportunity with me. Together we formed a collaboration that I will always appreciate. Thank you for being the pragmatic side of my brain, and for keeping things

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

This study captures the lived experiences of eight community college presidents in rural Illinois during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. The researchers were interested in learning about the previous crisis training and experiences that these presidents possessed, the leadership skills, competencies, and behaviors these presidents employed, and the personal and professional impacts they felt while leading during the global pandemic.

COVID

COVID-19 has impacted the world economy, altered cultural patterns, and reconfigured the education system. The novel coronavirus (2019-nCoV), also referred to as COVID-19, is one of the most contagious and deadly global public health crises of the last 100 years (CDC, 2020).

In late 2019, COVID-19 was identified as the root cause of a cluster of pneumonia-like virus cases identified in Wuhan, a city in the Hubei Province of China (CDC, 2020). The virus spread rapidly, resulting in an epidemic that emerged throughout China. This initial outbreak was followed by an increasing number of cases identified in other countries throughout the world in a period of just a few months (Uptodate, 2020). Very quickly, cases of the novel coronavirus rapidly spread across nations to become a global health crisis (WHO, 2020). On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization officially declared the novel coronavirus a global pandemic (WHO, 2020).

In response to the rapid spread of COVID-19 in the United States, a nationwide stay-at-home order was issued by the federal government in partnership with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the U.S. Food & Drug Administration. State and local governing bodies were urged to temporarily close schools and businesses (CDC, 2020).

After the nationwide stay-at-home order was issued, academic leaders across the United States were forced to shift educational and associated activities online. The decision to pivot to remote learning was made swiftly in reaction to the seriousness of the virus and the overall threat to human life.

IMPACT ON US HIGHER EDUCATION

In March of 2020, UNESCO estimated that, in the span of two months, 850 million individuals transitioned to alternative forms of learning and diversified modalities worldwide (UNESCO, 2020) following the reduction or elimination of in-person courses to support physical distancing efforts and mitigate the spread of the virus. Officials in 48 US states, as well as Washington DC, ordered or recommended school closures for the rest of the school year, according to one CNN tally (CNN, 2020).

IMPACT ON ILLINOIS HIGHER EDUCATION

Under the leadership of Governor J.B. Pritzker, the State of Illinois formalized an individual plan in response to COVID-19 designed to promote the health, well-being, and safety of its citizens (Illinois, 2020). On March 9, 2020, Governor Pritzker issued a statewide Disaster Proclamation. This order triggered a series of additional orders that would impact other local governing bodies and organizations. Between the dates of March 11, 2020, and March 21,

2020, Illinois had closed access to nursing homes; in-person access to bars and restaurants; and

had issued its own stay-at-home order (Petrella, 2020). On March 13th, Pritzker ordered

all public and private schools, colleges and universities closed by March 17 (Petrella, 2020).

Three days later, on March 20th, Pritzker issued a stay-at-home order for the entire state,

except for a limited array of workplaces that were deemed essential services. The order also

banned gatherings of more than 10 people and closed playgrounds (Petrella, 2020). Eventually,

the State of Illinois developed a more structured and organized statewide plan aimed at

responding to COVID-19, known as the Restore Illinois plan; however, the formalization and

release of this plan would not come until May 5, 2020.

ILLINOIS COMMUNITY COLLEGE SYSTEM

The Illinois community college system was one sector of higher education in the state of

Illinois affected during this mandatory shut down. The Illinois Community College system

comprises 48 public community colleges serving 39 college districts (ICCB, 2021a). The Illinois

community college system is built on a three-tier structure of governance (ICCB, 2021 a). Each

district within the system, with the exception of one of two multi-college districts, is locally

governed under the direction and leadership of an elected Board of Trustees. Additionally, the

Illinois Community College system operates under two statewide governing and coordinating

bodies, the Illinois Community College Board (ICCB) and the Illinois Board of Higher Education

(IBHE) (ICCB, 2021a).

This system is designed to meet both local and statewide needs for education and

workforce development by providing high-quality, accessible, cost-effective educational

opportunities, programs, and services for a diverse student population (ICCB, 2021a). The

statewide system is designed to ensure that traditional and non-traditional students are

provided accessible pathways into and across learning opportunities that lead to in-demand

occupations that provide economic value to the communities they serve. For local control, each

community college is directed by a locally elected Board of Trustees that directs each college

president to make operational decisions within the parameters of federal and state laws.

During fiscal year 2019, the Illinois community college system served 664,973 students

in credit and noncredit bearing courses (ICCB, 2021b). At this time, the structure of the Illinois

community college system consisted primarily of brick-and-mortar institutions that offered

learning opportunities to students through a variety of modalities such as in-person, online, and

blended hybrid courses. Operations such as academic and student support services, as well as

general business functions, remained largely in-house for most of these institutions prior to

COVID-19 (ICCB 2021 a). During the COVID shutdown, guidance, and directives for the

operation of Illinois' community colleges came from ICCB.

ICCB (ICCB, 2019) groups its community colleges into seven peer groups. The seven peer

groups are based on a combination of college enrollment (semester), geographic location, and

financial data and include:

1. Headcount enrollment of less than 3,000, downstate, located in or near
   communities of less than 50,000 population

2. Headcount enrollment of approximately 3,000 to 4,000, downstate, located in or
   near communities of less than 50,000 population

3. Headcount enrollment greater than 4,000, downstate, located in or near
   communities of less than 50,000 population

4. Located downstate and in urbanized areas

5. Headcount enrollment less than 10,000, located in the Chicago metropolitan area

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6. City Colleges of Chicago

7. Headcount enrollment greater than 10,000, located in the Chicago metropolitan area. This research focuses on peer group 1 and 2 which primarily serve rural Illinois communities.

RURAL COMMUNITY COLLEGES

Rural America accounts for 85% of the geography of the United States but contains only 15% of the nation's population (Miller & Kissenger, 2007). Rural community colleges make up 45% of all two-year colleges and educate one third of all community college students each year (Katsinas & Hardy, 2004). Definitions of rural consist of "a set of identifiers that include the words low, slow and high-low population density, low total populations, low per-capita income, low levels of educational attainment, slow job growth, high poverty, high unemployment, and high rates of illiteracy" (Gillett-Karam, 1995, p. 43).

Because the U.S. is a nation in which many people live in areas not clearly rural or urban, seemingly small changes in definition can have significant impact on who and what constitutes rural. Researchers and policymakers share the task of choosing appropriately from among the multitude of rural definitions currently available or creating their own unique definitions (USDA, 2019).

The exact number of rural community colleges in the United States varies based on who is counting. In a recent publication from the Association of Community College Trustees (ACCT) states "according to the Department of Education, there are 260 rural community colleges in the United States (ACCT, 2021). ACCT (2021) goes on to state that the Rural Community College Alliance (RCCA) puts the number between 600 and 800. This wide disparity can be attributed in part to disagreements over the definition of rural. At the federal level, there are more than a

dozen definitions of rurality, based on a variety of factors, from population density to geographic isolation, to socioeconomic indicators (ACCT, 2021). The wide variety of definitions is in many ways appropriate, as it underscores the fact that rural America is not a monolith; however, the different standards complicate assessing rural community college needs.

Researchers and policy officials employ many definitions to distinguish rural from urban areas, which often leads to unnecessary confusion and unwanted mismatches in program eligibility. However, the existence of multiple rural definitions reflects the reality that rural and urban are multidimensional concepts (USDA, 2019). Sometimes population density is the defining concern, in other cases it is geographic isolation. Population thresholds used to differentiate rural and urban communities range from 2,500 up to 50,000 residents, depending on the definition (USDA, 2019).

For the purposes of this study, the term rural will be used as a reference to rural serving Illinois community colleges. Rural community colleges are defined as serving fewer than 4,000 students and located in an area of less than 50,000 people as designated by the ICCB.

CRISIS LEADERSHIP

A crisis can be defined as a relatively unexpected occurrence that creates ambiguity about both the cause and consequences of the event which requires critical decisions to be made with time sensitivity to ensure the continued viability of an organization (Gilpin & Murphy, 2008; Pearson & Clair, 2008; Wooten & James, 2008). Crisis management is a growing area of awareness and concern in higher education administration due to the demands the crises places on campus leadership. Leaders play a crucial role in facilitating and directing the

day-to-day operations of an organization, including responding appropriately, efficiently, and effectively to unforeseen crises.

The attributes of an effective academic leader when facing adaptive challenges have been described as including accountability, trustworthiness, and integrity (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020). Heifetz et al, (2009) describe adaptive leadership as the activity of mobilizing people to tackle the toughest problems and do the adaptive work necessary to achieve progress. However, in a crisis, many researchers claim that perhaps the most important attributes of all are emotional intelligence and emotional stability that will allow the academic leader to place the interests of others above their own in servant leadership (Doraiswamy, 2012). Servant leadership in modern literature is synonymous with the late Robert Greenleaf. His work is seminal to the academic understanding of servant leadership. Based on a compilation of Greenleaf's works, Spears (1998), identified ten characteristics of servant leadership. The ten characteristics are (a) listening, (b) empathy, (c) healing, (d) awareness, (e) persuasion, (f) conceptualization, (g) foresight, (h) stewardship, (i)commitment to the growth of people, and (j) building community.

During periods of crisis, it is not uncommon for individuals to experience early instances of normalcy bias. According to Murata, Nakamura, & Karwowski (2015) normalcy bias is the idea that people tend to minimize the early signs of crisis, and to regard situations of abnormality as typical occurrences. As we saw in early 2020, when faced with the coronavirus pandemic, academic leaders had to quickly overcome any lingering normalcy bias that they may have harbored early on, and quickly reassess their current reality in which students, faculty, and staff were experiencing genuine difficulties to their everyday lives.

The importance of a leader becomes ever more vital to an organization's ability to successfully navigate the unknowns and challenges during a period of crisis. Higher education institutions such as community colleges are susceptible to the emergence of a wide range of crisis situations (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). Whether it is a financial catastrophe or a personnel scandal, people look to their leaders for guidance during times of uncertainty and crisis (Merolla, Ramos, & Zechmeister, 2007).

Given the level of seriousness and the risk for potential threat, the COVID-19 pandemic quickly emerged as an urgent and large-scale, prolonged crisis for college leaders. Yet, as research into crisis management indicates, many community college presidents report that they feel under prepared with the necessary knowledge or skills needed to manage crisis situations at their institutions (Eddy, 2012; Murray & Kishur Jr., 2008). This lack of preparation becomes a concerning worry because a poorly managed crisis can negatively impact the culture and personal narrative of an institution long after the crisis itself has subsided (Genshaft, 2014).

In addition to the community college presidents' level of preparedness, their self-identified leadership style can impact their views on their responsibilities and duties during a prolonged crisis. Whereas some presidents view themselves as representatives of the institution (Valentine, Nam, Hollingworth, & Hall, 2014), others view their primary responsibility as servants to the stakeholders, and others see their position as providing the driving forces behind the actions taken (Valentine et al., 2014).

While it may be impossible to prepare multiple stakeholders, departments, or communities for every possible crisis scenario, the actions of a leader during a specific critical moment can make a significant difference to the health and future of the organization.

Understanding the lived experiences of leaders in crisis may help future and current leaders identify key approaches and strategies for response and prepare them for other future crisis situations.

THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY COLLEGE PRESIDENT/CEO

Successful rural community college leaders are in tune with their local constituency and must exhibit basic leadership competencies such as "advocacy, collaboration and communication" (Cejda, 2012, p. 56) in order to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of fulfilling their institutional missions. These competencies are instilled in potential leaders through local and national leadership experiences, through mentoring partnerships, and through the pursuit of advanced educational learning opportunities geared toward community college leadership (Jackson, 2019, p. 28).

No one would argue that effective community college leadership requires a strong foundation of knowledge and skills within specific competencies. Competencies can be defined as the skills required to serve as an effective leader and engage in transformational leadership (AACC, 2005; 2013). Ultimately, the direction of the organization is led by the president or Chief Executive Officer (CEO). According to Hines (2011), community college presidents face internal and external challenges. Hines (2011) goes onto say that successful presidents learn to balance and to prioritize effectively, and to lead by example rather than by fear.

Jackson (2019) states "Too often, presidents fail to self-appraise and do not recognize their weaknesses and vulnerabilities when leading teams. Ineffective and unsuccessful leaders often lack the wisdom necessary to recognize problems early, and the courage to address them promptly" (p. 26). Jackson continues, saying "issues such as negativity in the college culture,

non-supportive board members, and lack of integrity within the leadership teams can contribute to the demise of a community college if left unaddressed" (p. 26). Hines (2011) emphasizes that successful community college leaders are those who recognize others' strengths, sacrifice to ensure others gain opportunity, model so that others can find the way, display courage so that others feel empowered and confident, and take risks so that untapped potential can be realized and uncharted territory can be explored.

COMMUNITY COLLEGE LEADERSHIP COMPETENCIES

Questions about the competencies, values, and knowledge community college presidents need in order to lead their organizations into the 21st century have been extensively discussed and studied over the past two decades by both advocacy organizations as well as researchers (Eddy, Sydbow, Alfred, & Garza-Mitchell, 2015; Ellis & Garcia, 2017). Several community college leadership frameworks have emerged from this work including the American Association of Community College's (AACC) Competencies for Community College Leaders (2005, 2013). The AACC leadership construct highlights competencies that community college presidents ideally possess in order to effectively lead their organizations during a period of unprecedented change (Eddy & Mitchell, 2017). Examples of unprecedented change that community college leaders have faced over recent years include declining enrollment, reductions in state funding, and increased scrutiny over completion rates (Eddy, 2012; Phelan, 2016). However, even with the growing body of literature focusing on the importance of crisis management and crisis leadership, it remains the one critical area of competencies not clearly outlined within AACC's (2005, 2013) community college leadership framework.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

An abundance of literature exists on the skills, attributes, and behaviors commonly associated with community college presidents during periods of normal operating leadership. Much of this research has been driven by the increased demand to adequately prepare both aspiring CEOs and hiring institutions interested in sustaining a qualified pipeline of future leaders. Additionally, there also exists a relatively large body of research focused on leadership during periods during crisis. Walker et al. (2016) notes that crisis leaders not only have many decisions to make but also have the pressure of the media, of understanding their organizations, and of consuming accurate information as challenges to contend with. Bell (2019) found that leaders deal with volatile and complex crises across multiple types of situations that all require immediate attention, information for decision-making, and a strategic approach.

However, a gap in knowledge and understanding remains at the intersectionality of where these two facets converge: normal operations and situations of prolonged crisis. Understanding how leaders respond, and the leadership qualities that emerge, during prolonged periods of crisis are essential to fully understanding the role of the community college president.

Additionally, understanding the leadership grit necessary to sustain periods of overwhelming challenge is a critical component of value to a leader's overall ability to remain persistent, to thrive, and to overcome adversity during crisis. The concept of grit as defined by Stoltz (2021), emphasizes sustainability as a key element to surviving challenging situations that often lend themselves to intense struggle.

Since the inception of community / junior colleges, few have operated during periods of widespread infectious diseases. In the state of Illinois, only the very first two-year college in the United States, Joliet Junior College established in 1901, was in operation during a large-scale pandemic affecting the United States: The Spanish Flu pandemic of 1918 (Carlton, 2020).

The emergence of COVID-19 has brought forth challenges for all institutions of higher education, but particularly noteworthy is the fact that very little research, if any at all, existed prior to 2020 on college leadership skills and a leader's response to a global health crisis.

Because effective leaders need to be nimble, flexible, and responsive to emergent situations, the purpose of this primary study is to examine a cross-section of rural community colleges in the state of Illinois in order to explore the competencies their CEOs employed within the first months of the COVID-19 health pandemic. The goal of this research is that by carefully examining and developing an in-depth understanding of what a few rural community college leaders experienced, that themes will emerge in order to drive future research about the COVID-19 crisis response and identify competencies that can be utilized by other community college presidents.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In qualitative research, theoretical frameworks are used to shape research designs (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2014). Theory can help researchers make decisions about problem statements, sample selection, data collection, and data analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Yin, 2014). Researchers may also utilize a variety of strategies to increase the perceived validity of findings such as theoretical triangulation and pattern matching, or a normalizing process each as analytic tools aimed at making sense of the findings (Yin, 2014). Each of these analysis

strategies involve some degree of comparing multiple resources, or sources of input, designed to help develop a more comprehensive understanding of the data. As an example, researchers might engage in the process of normalization whereby data is evaluated by two or more individuals and the findings are compared for validity and accuracy.

This qualitative research study uses a descriptive phenomenological framework for exploring the lived experience of a purposive sample of eight rural Illinois community college presidents, and their response during the first year of the prolonged COVID-19 pandemic.

This research does not consider confounding variables such as gender into the data analysis, because the sample size for this study is not large enough to be able to assess any real significance across multiple variables. Personal narratives serve as the foundation for this descriptive research design with the intent to capture a cross-sectional understanding of the competencies (prior knowledge, skills, behaviors, and resources) that the sample of presidents individually describe as emerging during the period of time from which they first learned about COVID-19 up through the first year of their leadership response.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This qualitative research seeks to analyze the lived experience of a small group of rural Illinois community college presidents in order to identify actions, leadership competencies, and behaviors that were employed during the ongoing crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The significance of this study is to enhance the knowledge of community college presidents' crisis management, and to expand knowledge of community college crisis leadership during a prolonged crisis.

The goal of this research is to carefully examine and develop an in-depth understanding of what a few rural community college leaders experienced during the COVID-19 crisis, and to identify themes that emerged in order to drive future research about leadership during a prolonged crisis response. This research also seeks to identify competencies that can be utilized by other rural community college presidents when navigating a prolonged crisis situation in the future.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

For this study, the researchers were interested in exploring three primary aspects of leadership that emerged as a result of the COVID-19 crisis situation: First, the competencies that were critical for presidents as they navigated the many facets of crisis management throughout the COVID-19 health crisis; second, the trainings and resources referenced by the presidents in order to drive decision-making as they navigated their leadership response; third, the ways in which the president, as an individual, may have been impacted or affected by the prolonged crisis management situation, in comparison to periods of regular operations. As a means for measuring these three aspects, the following research questions were developed and guided this study:

1. How does crisis management training and/or experience affect a community college president's practices in an actual crisis?

2. What resources and support systems prove to be valuable and essential for a community college president when facing a crisis?

3. What initial actions, decisions, and behaviors drive a community college president when first faced with a crisis?

4. What factors affected the President's personal leadership experience?

The following terms defined below guided this research:

Competency-capability to apply or use a set of related knowledge, skills, and abilities to successfully perform tasks and make decisions in a work setting.

Crisis-An unexpected occurrence that impacts an organization that requires an action or decision to be made.

Normalization- A process of data analysis whereby two or more researchers compare and contrast identified themes that emerged as part of the data collection process. The process of "norming" for the purposes of this research refers to a researcher-driven examination and alignment of the data, as tool for measuring validity.

Prolonged Crisis- defined as the declaration of the COVID-19 pandemic in Illinois that went into effect on March 16, 2020, and lasted through the duration of the participant interviews which ended on March 10, 2021.

President-The person appointed by the Board of Trustees and is the chief executive, administrative and academic officer of the community college they represent.

Rural- an area outside of an urban or suburban location that has less than 50,000 people in a multicounty community college service area and no single community of more than 31,000 people.

Rural Illinois Community Colleges- serving fewer than 4,000 students and located in an area of less than 50,000 people as designated by the Illinois Community College Board (ICCB).

Grit- The resolve and perseverance needed to persist through situations of intense challenge or stress.

Stress- The pile-up of stressors whereby resources and coping strategies are required to overcome tension, pressure, or strain.

DELIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This qualitative research is focused on the lived experience of eight rural Illinois

community college presidents who led their colleges during the first year of the COVID-19

pandemic. All of the presidents who participated in the study were selected because they serve

rural Illinois community colleges as defined above. Urban and suburban presidents were

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excluded from this body of research due to the emphasis on rural as a key component of this study.

The study was conducted seven months after the pandemic restrictions were lifted, and approximately one year after the initial state lockdown order was put into place. The initial lockdown was ordered by the Illinois governor on March 13, 2020; next on March 17, 2020 the governor issued Executive Order 2020-05, also known as the COVID-19 Executive Order No.3, declaring all public and private educational institutions to shut down; and then on May 28, 2020, the State of Illinois, and the Governor's Office, instituted a state reopening plan which outlined the process for eventually lifting the lock down restrictions (Illinois, 2020).

The focus period for this study is the first year of the COVID-19 prolonged pandemic, and the interviews were conducted and concluded post this this timeframe, at the end of March 2021. Thus, the participants' descriptions of their decision-making process and their initial steps have already occurred.

The study was conducted by two researchers. One of the researchers happens to fit the demographics of the study's sample and serves as a president for a rural community college in Illinois; and was also serving as the President of the Illinois Council of Community College Presidents when the declaration of the pandemic was issued. The second researcher serves as a dean of instruction at an institution that is also a part of the study pool. The researchers' perspectives of the pandemic from leading within these institutions and in similar leadership roles was intended as both a validity check, but also as an effective position for interpretation and analysis.

CHAPTER CONCLUSION

Crisis situations demand competent leadership. This research seeks to expand the scholarly knowledge of leadership strategies utilized during a period of prolonged crisis caused by a global pandemic. Administrators may have guidelines and plans to help them navigate during a short-term crisis, but this research aims to add depth and understanding of the leadership qualities, skills, and behaviors that were displayed by a select group of presidents while leading a rural Illinois community college during a prolonged global pandemic.

Chapter Two of this study explores the literature regarding leadership during crisis response, preparation efforts for crisis management in higher education; identified leadership roles; and influences on professional and personal responses to crisis. Chapter Three reviews the methodology of this study, including the selection of the participants and the data collection process. Chapter Four discusses the results of the data collection process and the data analysis findings. And, Chapter Five provides a discussion of the implications of this research; the limitations and delimitations of the study; and recommendations for future research as informed by the data that was collected.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

INTRODUCTION

Understanding the nuanced elements related to leadership in times of crisis is a critical component to readying new and emerging community college presidents as they prepare to step into their new role as CEO. The central focus of this literature review is to examine the research that currently exists pertaining to elements of leadership heavily centered within the context of crisis.

Using a qualitative research approach, the purpose of this study is to understand the lived experiences of rural community college presidents during periods of heightened and extended crisis. The goal is to better understand the leadership responses, behaviors, and competencies that emerge for presidents when faced with crisis situations and periods of heightened stress, in this case the extended COVID-19 global health pandemic.

In periods of crisis, "people will look to the senior leader for guidance, hope, and a sense of security" (Gigliotti, 2020, p. 137). The significance of this study is to contribute to the existing body of knowledge related to leadership competencies aimed at developing new and emerging leaders, with the hopes of expanding the current body of research in areas such as crisis response, crisis preparation, crisis leadership, and more generally, navigating change as explored in the following review of literature.

DEFINING CRISIS

Defining the term "crisis" is not something easily achieved, nor readily agreed upon. A multitude of terms and definitions exist related to the vast, and comprehensive, concept of crisis. Crisis is a broad term, often with extensive and encompassing reach, frequently used by practitioners and academics (Coombs, 2022). The definition of crisis is not yet universally defined, and it is often defined differently based on the field of study utilizing the term (Shaluf & Said, 2003). As defined by Rosenthal, Boin, and Comfort (2001), a crisis can generally be thought of as a "threat characterized by periods of upheaval and collective stress, that of which serves to disrupt everyday patterns of behavior, core values, and overall social structures" (p. 6). Coombs (2022) defines a crisis as something unpredictable, yet not entirely unexpected.

An alternate definition for the term crisis, rooted in Greek history and as proposed by Boin, Hart, and Kuipers (2017), "refers to a critical point, a fork in the road of development, a moment of decision" (p. 24). As noted by Gigliotti (2020), the word "crisis" as it was originally intended and based in Greek and Latin roots, was first framed as imposing an optimistic perception or lens upon a situation of rather negative or difficult occurrence. It was first mentioned as referring to the turning point away from negative threats such as "illness, tragedy, or peril" (p. 21). Similarly, Chinese history and culture are known to have coined a definition for the concept of crisis. According to Sellnow and Seeger (2021), the Chinese reference for a crisis is known as "Wei Chi" which translates to dangerous opportunity (p. 10).

Later into the eighteenth century, "the word crisis evolved to signify a difficult situation or dilemma — a 'turning point' oriented toward decline and destruction, rather than one of

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hope or opportunity" (Gigliotti, 2020, p. 22). This becomes an important distinction across research as it relates to the evolution of the term crisis, both in use and application.

It was after this shift that researchers gained the realization that the idea of "crisis" is something that only exists if it is perceived, and in conjunction with the overall perception of three main elements which Hermann (1963) and Gigliotti (2020) outline as surprise, threat, and a shortened response time, or sense of urgency. Gigliotti further notes that the idea of a crisis exists as a construct derived from social construction based primarily in human awareness and perception. (2020). Thus, the emergence and existence of a crisis really only comes to pass when human perception formally deems something to be noted and defined in such a way.

DIFFERENTIATING CRISIS

Another facet related to defining a crisis is distinguishing it from other periods of intense challenge. Schaluf, Ahmadun, and Said (2003) differentiate a crisis from other significant phenomena such as disasters, accidents, and tragedies; they conclude that one key difference is that a crisis tends to affect an organization, or a business sector, across a comprehensive scope of impact. Researchers agree that a crisis typically poses a significant threat or risk that has the potential to affect an entire organization; whereas, if something occurs that poses threat to only one or a few areas of an organization, it might not meet the general criteria for being defined as a crisis, but rather be better thought about as an incident (Schaluf, Ahmadun, & Said, 2003). Gigliotti (2020) differentiates crises in higher education as institutional and / or environmental crises. He describes institutional crises as events that happen at one particular college or university while environmental crises are broader issues in higher education that present challenges to a larger system.

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TYPES OF CRISIS

A large body of research exists on the historical and categorical types of crises that occur. Lerbinger (1997) and Coombs (1999) first identified eight broad types of crises: natural disasters, technological crisis, confrontation, malevolence, organizational misdeeds, workplace violence, rumors, and terrorists / man-made crises. Later, Thompson (2020) focused on the historical origins and the types of categorized crises that more generally emerge. Thompson's research outlines three major types of crises: developmental, situational, and existential. Her research summarizes the findings from other bodies of research of the three primary types of crises, each of which — much like Lerbinger and Coombs' research from the late 1990s — possess certain characteristics and qualities that distinguish them from the other broad types.

CRISES AFFECTING THE WORKPLACE

The research does narrow in focus and explore types of crises that are most commonly associated as affecting the workplace. The research of Shaluf, Ahmadun, and Said (2003) compares distinctions between elements associated with a crisis to elements commonly associated with disasters. Their research examined characteristics present in each type of emergent situation, and also noted a hierarchical structure for breaking down the types of crises that occur. These researchers identify layers of crisis identification with such topic distinctions such as natural, industrial, and non-industrial types of crises.

Gigliotti (2020) describes two different crisis domains that were established from content analysis of varying types of crisis situations. The two crisis domains that emerged are institutional and environmental crises. Institutional crises could include allegations of fraud, student death, or other crises that impact small individual portions of a college or university.

Gigliotti (2020) goes on to share that environmental crises present challenges to the entire system, and could include an institution-wide financial crisis, student loan crisis, or an event that could impact the operations of the entire organization. An organizational crisis is a type of crisis that leaders and stakeholders report as causing disruption to operations for one or more areas of a business or the organization.

COVID-19 CRISIS AND HIGHER EDUCATION

A key researcher in the area of crisis as a conceptual construct is Ralph Gigliotti (2020). Gigliotti's research takes a deep dive into the examination of factors associated with a crisis applied across varying aspects of higher education leadership. His research outlines what he refers to as the *Taxonomy of Crisis Types in Higher Education*. Types of crises specific to higher education include (a) academic, (b) athletics, (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 (p. 70-73). The prolonged crisis of COVID-19, or health related crisis, is not included in Gigliotti's aforementioned types of crises impacting higher education and would need to be included in future research.

CRISIS RESPONSE

CRISIS MANAGEMENT AND CRISIS LEADERSHIP MODELS/ FRAMEWORKS

A 2011 study by Vargo and Seville defines crisis as a threat to an institution that includes an element of surprise and requires decision-making within a short timeframe. Coombs (2019) outlines a crisis framework with three phases: pre crisis, crisis event, and post crisis. The pre-crisis phrase includes early warning signs, prevention, and crisis preparation including forming

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crisis teams and identifying risks. The crisis event centers around recognition and containment. The post-crisis phase involves ensuring the organization is restored, establishing image control for the organization and the management, and wrapping up the crisis by returning to homeostasis and ensuring the crisis period has been resolved.

Urick, Carpenter, and Eckert (2021) conceptualized leadership responses to crises. They noted that the overall goal for both crisis management and crisis leadership is to address risks or threats in such a way that there is a return to normal operations as quickly as possible. The broad goal for both crisis management and crisis leadership is not permanent change, but rather resolution. The goal of returning to normative operations as a leadership approach to crisis management presents a challenge in leading transformational change during the transition.

Gigliotti (2020) noted that differentiating between crisis management and crisis leadership is both nuanced and distinct. In response to crisis, crisis management can be thought about from the lens of mechanical or tactical whereas, crisis leadership refers more to a role that is "systematic, provocative, and expansive" in nature (p. 38).

CRISES AND CRISIS PLANNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Coombs (2019) found in his research that, if managed well, smaller scale incidents can avoid spilling into the full-blown crisis stage. Mitroff et al., (2006) shared that crises have impacted colleges and universities since these institutions were created. From natural disasters to grade scandals, to acts of violence, colleges have been relatively stable over time, and for the most part have been largely able to weather crises. While research indicates crises have been on the rise at colleges and universities in recent decades (Mitroff et al., 2006), the COVID-19

global pandemic is unlike any prior crisis that institutions have generally experienced. Mitroff et al. (2006) shared that crisis management in higher education can be more complex compared to other sectors, as colleges provide a broad range of services to students including education, food services, health services, and in some cases, residence halls. When a crisis impacts a college campus, multiple systems and stakeholders are put at risk.

Crisis management is broader than emergency response and seeks to provide resources to effectively respond to crisis, and to mitigate the negative impact of crisis (Coombs, 2019; Vargo & Seville, 2011). Ayebi-Arthur (2017) found in a study of one university's response to two separate earthquake events, where one event occurred during the academic calendar year and the other event occurred outside of the academic calendar year, that the crisis response to the earthquake that occurred during the academic year required far greater support across multiple areas of service. Graham (2020) found that leaders had to develop different and separate response plans related to instruction, housing, athletics, facilities, and staffing plans. According to Graham, the COVID-19 pandemic impacted all college services areas in different and unique ways.

STAGES / PHASES OF CRISIS

A crisis has the potential to appear in a variety of scenarios with a unique string of events. For example, Fink (1986) uses the progression of medical illness to portray four stages of crisis. The four stages include prodromal (clues or hints of a potential crisis), acute (trigger events to a crisis), chronic (effects of the crisis linger), and resolution (clear signals that the crisis is no longer a concern). A second model of the phases of crisis is by Mitroff (1994) that divides crisis management into five phases: signal detection, probing and prevention, damage

containment, recovery, and learning. Coombs (2015) identifies a third way of describing the

evolution of crisis: pre-crisis, crisis event, and post-crisis. Gigliotti and Fortunato (2017) note

that the models provide coherent ordering of crisis moments; yet, crises, by their nature, are

unpredictable and call for leaders to be both flexible and prepared.

CRISIS LEADERSHIP AND HIGHER EDUCATION

An area of research that examines crisis leadership in higher education identifies many

of the known risks and threats to institutions that are often observed impacting other

organizations. Moerschell and Novak (2020), for example, emphasized that a crisis as applied to

institutions of higher education is known to pose a threat to institutional reputation and risk /

danger to the institutional community, individual stakeholders, and organizational operations.

Mumford et al. (2000) found complex problems created by a crisis require creative

problem-solving, flexibility, wisdom, perspective-taking, strong communication skills, and

attention to base knowledge. In a survey of 51 Federal Emergency Management Agency

managers, Van Wart and Kapucu (2011) asked participants about key leader competencies

necessary for successful crisis management and found that three central competencies areas

were required. First, strong and calm leadership with a willingness to assume responsibility,

resilience, communication skills, and an ability to articulate a clear mission and vision. Next is

rational and sensible decisions-making that takes into consideration time and resource

constraints. Thirdly, Van Wart and Kapucu, (2011) stated that adaptive coordination involves

team building, operational planning, social skill development, and partnering.

Crisis management is at times described as a special type of change management (Baer

& Duin, 2020; Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010; Van Wart & Kapucu, 2011). Maitlis and Sonenshein

(2010) found that both crisis and change can result in confusion, fear, and anxiety. The COVID-19 pandemic, for example, forced much of the workforce to work from home, and faculty to shift operations behind a computer screen. Crisis leadership is the ability of leaders to identify issues that have high levels of uncertainty and threat, process information, set priorities, and make critical decisions that influence and enable others to contribute to the achievement of a common goal (Harms et al., 2017).

Walker et al. (2016) note that crisis leaders not only have many decisions to make but also have the pressure of the media, of understanding their organizations, and of consuming accurate information. Bell (2019) found that leaders deal with volatile and complex crises at multiple levels that require immediate attention, information for decision-making, and a strategic approach. Fernandez and Shaw (2020) state that today's leaders faced difficulty during COVID-19 given the limited amount of prior knowledge that existed across fields of leadership related to any sort of large-scale health pandemic response.

LEADER DECISION-MAKING

One of the expectations of leadership during a crisis is sound and effective decision making. The decisions that leaders make have significant impacts on organizational strategy and how an institution is able to achieve their goals, both in normal times and through disruption (Garbuio et al., 2015; Mumford et al., 2000; Wang, 2021). This section will review literature on decision-making during crisis, and leadership strategies for decision-making during crisis.

Cognitive Strategies

When making decisions, leaders can either make quick gut-reaction decisions or gather, analyze, and consider different pieces of data. These cognitive strategies, which center on both

intuition and / or analytic reasoning, are based on dual process theories of cognition (Luoma &

Martela, 2019). Dual process theories of cognition propose that there are two modes of

thinking: System 1 thinking, which is automatic and non-conscious, and requires little effort;

and System 2 thinking, which is conscious and involves processing, and requires a high level of

mental attention (Kahneman, 2011; Luoma & Martela, 2019).

Emotion

Research from multiple disciplines has examined the role of emotion in leadership and

decision-making (Kahneman, 2011; Lerner et al., 2015; Khorram-Manesh et al., 2016; Treffers et

al., 2018; Wang, 2021). For example, emotions such as empathy and compassion can lead to

decisions that have more kindness (Wang, 2021), whereas, sad emotions can result in more

narrowed, focused, and elaborate information processing (Treffers et al., 2018). Lerner et al.

(2015) found that, in cases where the emotional pressures are negative or unwanted, it is

challenging for leaders to reduce the influence that the emotional pressure has on their

leadership decision-making. Graham (2020) found that many leaders who were making

decisions during the COVID-19 pandemic reported high levels of emotional anxiety and

uncertainty.

Context

Snowden and Boone (2007) discovered that the decisions that leaders make are also

influenced by the context within which the leader is making their decisions. Garbuio et al.

(2012) found that crises create complex contexts within which leaders need to frame various

decisions, all of which are complicated by their ability to understand and analyze varying

amounts of ambiguous information (Elbanna et al., 2013). Also contributing to decision-making

in context are the ways in which the leader engages different groups of stakeholders. Garbuio et al. (2015) argue that strategic decision-making is made up of two key components — analysis and strategic conversations — which center on engagement within transparent discussion about a decision, while also considering its place within a broader set of decisions. Garbuio et al. conducted a study of more than 600 strategic decisions and found that strategic conversations have a significant impact on the effectiveness of strategic decisions, even more so than analysis.

While strategic conversations among decision-makers is important and helpful, (Gabuio et al., 2015) it is also noted that the establishment of a high-functioning top management team has proven to be associated with importance to the decision-making context (Shepherd et al., 2020).

LEADER DECISION-MAKING DURING CRISIS

Hemmer and Elliff's (2020) research found that leader decision-making during a crisis differs from day-to-day decision-making. During a crisis, leaders set important direction, share key details, and make crucial decisions that impact the organization and its stakeholders. Some argue that the decisions leaders make during a crisis are even more important than non-crisis situations, as crisis situations create threats beyond the decision at hand and impact the safety of people, the reputation of the organization, and financial stability (Coombs, 2019; Walumbwa et al., 2014). Hemmer and Eliff (2020) found that crisis situations forced leaders to deal with uncertainty, acute emotions, and consequences in urgent ways. Crisis creates complex and fast-paced decisions and actions. Research has shown that complex and challenging decisions require significant effort and are influenced by elements of both context and emotion

(Kahneman, 2011; Khorram-Manesh et al., 2016). Effective decisions involve complex analysis, an understanding of the information on hand, and an acknowledgement of what information is not available (Garbuio et al., 2015). Crises, too, can create an information void (Coombs, 2019) and require processing of ambiguous information (Elbanna et al., 2013), especially when information about the crisis, its impact, spread, and what to do about it can be unclear or even contractionary at times.

Kahneman (2011) stated that activities and decisions that require effort, whether it be mental, emotional, or physical effort, draw from the same pool of leadership energy. During the pandemic, the mental and emotional drain of making decisions and considering the implications of such decisions — both professional and personal — were real and significant challenges for leaders. Maitlis and Sonenshein (2010) found that crisis situations are generally characterized by intense negative emotions such as anxiety, fear, and desperation.

Treffers (2018) adds that an added challenge associated with decision-making in crisis is time constraints. Time constraints produced by the crisis context create an additional demand on cognitive resources making it difficult for leaders to generate ideas and make decisions (Treffers, 2018). Kahneman (2011) contends the cognitive resource demand is further exacerbated when leaders must switch quickly from one task to another, such as in the instances when college leaders must work simultaneously to develop plans for different constituencies and business operations.

Leaders face many challenges when making decisions during a crisis. Research has found that strategies such as sensemaking (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010), reflection (Lanaj et al., 2019), and reframing (Luoma & Martella, 2020) can assist leaders with making decisions during a crisis.

Sensemaking

Maitlis and Sonenshein (2010) found that to integrate the different elements that arise in a crisis context, leaders can use sensemaking to process, understand, and decide how to act. To make sense of a crisis, leaders work to find ways to understand the situation, gain control, and initiate action. Hemmer and Elliff (2020) explained that school leaders responding to Hurricane Harvey faced a highly complex crisis situation. During the Hurricane Harvey crisis, researchers found that the responses that leaders faced ranged from technical challenges to engaging in adaptive behaviors. Due to the range of challenges and the adaptiveness required to navigate a crisis situation, Hemmer and Elliff (2020) found that sensemaking helped leaders to be flexible and make quick decisions.

Self-Reflection

Schon (1983) and Theirl et al. (2012) found that self-reflection can also assist leaders during a crisis. The personal and professional experiences leaders bring to their positions can serve as resources for them in times of ambiguous situations. Lanaj et al. (2019) found self-reflection can help leaders to sustain the energy level and focus needed to lead. Lanaj et al. (2019) go on to note that self-reflection has been found to be an effective strategy for leaders in increasing awareness of a leader's priorities and goals.

Reframing

Luoma and Martela (2019) argue that reframing is helpful in complex and changing contexts; they also acknowledge that the practice of reframing can increase the cognitive resources required of the leader, as well as the time needed to make a decision. Baer and Duin (2020) observed that the higher education landscape has been shifting and the changes caused by the pandemic offer leaders an opportunity to rethink how they both serve students and offer services.

TRAININGS / RESOURCES FOR EDUCATIONAL LEADERS

LEADERSHIP RESOURCES FOR COMMUNITY COLLEGE PRESIDENTS

Several notable professional development organizations have emerged as leaders of structured training opportunities, separate from degree granting programs in higher education and/or community college leadership, aimed at preparing existing and aspiring community college presidents for the role of CEO. Three widely known entities commonly associated with community college leadership are the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) (1920- present); the Aspen Institute (1949- present); and the League for Innovation in the Community College (League) (1968- present).

These organizations each provide specialized training and resource opportunities dedicated to the development of community college presidents. They offer access to professional support tools and other electronic resources through the promotion of conferences, workshops, and print publications aimed at advocacy and issues pertinent to leaders at two-year institutions. The AACC features the annual AACC Presidents Academy Summer Institute; the Aspen Institute offers both the *Rising President's Fellowship* award, as

well as the *New President's Fellowship* award, as part of its larger *Aspen Institute for Community College Excellence* training program; and the League hosts the *Executive Leadership Institute* and the *Presidents Track* training events, which are specifically focused on the role of the community college president.

In addition to the training opportunities that they provide, these three organizations offer published resources outlining various leadership competencies pertinent to the role of the community college president. Most notably, AACC offers a published manual of competencies associated with varying levels and lengths of tenure for community college leaders. This manual was first published in 2005 and has since been revised twice — once in 2013 and again in 2018 (American Association of Community Colleges, 2018). The Aspen Institute has also published a report outlining key issues and areas of focus facing the next generation of community college presidents (2017, May).

Training resources are also available for presidents leading in rural-serving districts. The Rural Community College Alliance supports partnering and member institutions through similar conference, publication, and training opportunities, much like the organizations noted above, but with specialized emphasis geared toward rural community colleges and leaders.

There is a growing body of research centered on the topic of the role of the presidency during a crisis. This literature examines the necessary competencies and skills associated with effective leadership during periods of immediate change. The AACC and the League are among a plethora of other support organizations that have resources dedicated to crisis leadership for presidents.

The AACC (2022) offers a rolling webpage dedicated solely to support resources relevant to COVID-19 and leadership. Similarly, the League for Innovation (2022) also has a dedicated webpage that serves as a repository for COVID-19 related leadership resources. The resources associated with leadership during COVID-19 are primarily governmental and / or educational in nature.

CRISIS PREPAREDNESS AND RESPONSE PLANS

National Incident Management System

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security (2008) created the National Incident Management System (NIMS). The NIMS framework has five components: preparedness, communication/information management, resource management, command and management, and ongoing management / maintenance. Recommendations for each component have been used to address challenges that higher education institutions may face during the pandemic and post pandemic environments.

Incident Command System

The Incident Command System (ICS) provides the framework to address and manage hazardous or threatening situations, providing an operational structure and protocols during the event. And as the title implies, it provides specifications regarding the components of a command center, command team, and the role of an on-scene incident commander.

Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) (2011) notes the foundational and operational strategies of the ICS were derived from military procedures and are meant to provide a flexible framework designed to address all the types of hazards that a community

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may face. The ICS administrative model divides first responder functions into five distinct areas of responsibility: command, finance, logistics, operations, and planning.

LEADERSHIP CHARACTERISTICS ASSOCIATED WITH LEADERS IN CRISIS

Studies conducted on higher education's response to COVID-19 have continued to emerge since the onset of the pandemic. Understanding senior leaders' responses to COVID-19 provides insight into characteristics and factors associated with crisis leadership.

LEADERSHIP COMPETENCIES AND CRISIS

Crisis leadership involves the enactment of decision-making competencies characterized by skills and behaviors that leaders execute when engaging in crisis response. Globally, a swath of leadership competencies has been identified since the onset of COVID-19, which serves as emerging best practices associated with effective leadership responses that have emerged throughout the pandemic.

In the United States, leadership competencies have started to be identified that have proven effective in supporting educational leaders' responses to COVID-19. According to Fernandez and Shaw (2020), several themes emerged as key elements of response for educational leaders in the U.S. These themes include engaging in practical servant leadership focused on high levels of emotional intelligence that empowers others through a collaborative lens; engaging in distributive leadership strategies focused on a network of teams; and engaging in effective communication patterns.

Marshall, Roache, and Moody-Marshall (2020) examined educational leadership in higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic in Barbados and Canada, and they identified four key recommendations for future leaders. First, leaders identified the need to encourage

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stakeholders to embrace change; second, leaders found filtering incoming information to be at times overwhelming or stressful; third, leaders identified the need to establish a sense of urgency around the crisis situation; and fourth, leaders noted the importance of identifying a clear vision to guide constituents through the transition.

Marshall, Roache, and Moody-Marshall (2020) also identified four critical leadership behaviors that emerged from their examination of senior leaders. The four primary practices that emerged as key behaviors and decisions were providing clear direction, communicating effectively, working collaboratively, and engaging in adaptive leadership.

In Nigeria, the educational leadership response to COVID-19 highlighted competencies centered on the Community-based Educational Leadership Model that outlines a response focused on adaptive leadership, collaboration, leaders who engage in practical managerial skills, and leadership that is persistent and empowers change (Gyang, 2020). Similar to Marshall, Roache, and Moody-Marshall (2020), Gyang (2020) emphasizes competencies that span across varying types of behaviors, skills, and decision-making strategies.

CRISIS DECISION-MAKING

Strategic decisions are important, infrequent, and interdependent choices that require significant resource commitment and that influence a firm's long-term profitability and survival (Leiblein, Reuer, & Zenger, 2018).

Comprehensiveness

Comprehensiveness is defined as the extent to which top managers systematically gather and process information in making strategic decisions (Forbes, 2007). Cabantous and Gond (2011) share that the comprehensiveness construct is rooted in the Modern Rational

Choice Theory (MRCT) and represents rationality of strategic decision-making processes by top management teams. Simon (1990) states this construct, by definition, acknowledges bounded rationality and cognitive limitations of human decision-makers.

Intuition

While comprehensive strategic decision-making processes rely on a deliberate, extensive, and systematic analysis, intuitive decision processes are largely based on managerial judgment or gut feelings (Elbanna & Fadol, 2016). Eisenhardt (1999) found that previously learned knowledge gained through years of experience enables executives to identify or sense the opportunities and threats surrounding a decision. Based on such feelings or implicit understandings, an intuitive decision-maker may proceed to go on to make a strategic choice.

Improvisation

Crossan, White, Lane, and Klus (1996) found improvisation has been differentiated from both comprehensiveness and intuition. While comprehensive processes may entail systematic and step-by-step plans for collection and analysis of information, improvisation has been described as the convergence of planning and execution. Crossan, White, Lane, and Klus (1996) go on to describe that improvised actions can recombine pieces of plans, but the more the action departs from a plan, the more improvisational the action becomes.

CRISIS COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

Communication was found to be critical to both the study and practice of crisis leadership (Agnew, 2014; Garcia, 2015; Gill 2012; Jacobsen, 2010; Menghini, 2014). Witherspoon (1997) views leadership as first and foremost a communication process or set of processes. Every leadership behavior is enacted through communication. According to Klann

(2003), communication, clarity of vision and values, and caring relationships are critical

components of crisis leadership. Muffet-Willett (2010) proposed five crisis leadership actions

that are most relevant to colleges and universities, with communication and feedback

mechanisms situated at every junction of each action. According to Barton (1993), in a crisis,

managers must know their audience, and communication during a crisis should have a clearly

articulated goal aligned with the needs of the audience. Gigliotti (2020) shares that there is no

guarantee that the message sent by a leader when attempting to manage a crisis — particularly

in the thick of the crisis itself — will be received by those most affected in the way that the

leader intended. Additionally, Gigliotti found that single messages seldom have much impact,

and that several delivery methods must be utilized to educate and update stakeholders.

Sturges (1994) found three primary categories for crisis communication response:

instructing information, adjusting information, and reputation management information.

Holladay (2009) describes instructing information as communication designed to help people

protect themselves physically from a crisis. Gephart Jr., Miller, and Svedberg-Helgesson (2018)

state that adjusting information corresponds to messages that help people cope psychologically

with the crisis. Coombs (2015) shares that reputation management strategies attempt to

mitigate or repair the reputational damage that a crisis inflicts upon an organization.

Organizations can enhance their communications and relationships with stakeholders if

they use digital media tools, including websites, emails, blogs, social media, on a consistent

basis (Eriksson & Olsson, 2016; Ngai & Singh, 2014; Caron, Hwang, Brummans & Caronia, 2013;

Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010). A review of the literature suggests that social media provided an

interactive platform that fostered relationships between organizations and their stakeholders

(Wang & Yang, 2020). However, Jones (2005) found that during crises, institutions and organizations do not always utilize these technologies in an appropriate or effective manner. The effective communication of crisis narratives can reduce negative emotions and may even enhance positive post-crisis outcomes (Yang et al., 2010; Coombs, 2007). Camilleri (2020) shares that institutions and organizations may choose to utilize social media as a means to disseminate online content, such as images, videos, live streams, et cetera, intended to engage stakeholders. Camilleri (2020) also observed that organizations may interact with stakeholders in one-on-one conversations via social media or messengers, to boost stakeholder morale and sense of belonging. Such communications can impart positive attitudes, improve the organizational culture, and enhance stakeholder relationships.

LEADERSHIP STYLES IN CRISIS

Extensive research has focused on leadership styles and approaches, with specific studies examining appropriate leadership styles during times of crisis or extreme organizational change.

Adaptive Leadership

Heifetz et al, (2009) state that adaptive leadership is the practice of mobilizing people to tackle tough challenges and to thrive. This approach has an emphasis on mobilizing followers rather than applying authority. Uhl-Bien et al. (2007) found that adaptive leadership is considered as a branch of complexity theory, which emphasizes collaboration and cooperation of individuals rather than relying solely on the leader to facilitate the process of change.

Directive Leadership

Research by Stoker et al. (2019) found that during a crisis, directive leadership, which includes giving direction and structuring tasks framed in an expectation of compliance, can be beneficial in resolving uncertainty and providing clear guidance to employees. Research also found that when this directive leadership approach is combined with a participative leadership style, primary school leaders experienced an increased ability to achieve desired student learning outcomes (Somech, 2005).

Distributed Leadership

Spillane et al. (2004) suggest that distributed leadership is best understood as the practice of distributing leadership responsibilities over a number of leaders and incorporating the activities of multiple groups or individuals across an organization. This implies a social distribution of leadership where the leadership function is stretched over the work of a number of individuals and the task is accomplished through the interaction of multiple leaders. This theoretical framework implies that the social context, and the inter-relationships therein, is an integral part of the leadership activity.

Servant leadership

Servant leadership in modern literature is synonymous with the late Robert Greenleaf. His work is seminal to the academic understanding of servant leadership. Based on a compilation of Greenleaf's works, Larry Spears (1998), CEO of Greenleaf Center for Servant-Leadership, identified ten characteristics of servant leadership. The ten characteristics are (a) listening, (b) empathy, (c) healing, (d) awareness, (e) persuasion, (f) conceptualization, (g) foresight, (h) stewardship, (i)commitment to the growth of people, and (j) building community.

Situational Leadership

According to Hersey and Blanchard (1993) situational leadership theory is based on the interplay between the extent of a leader's directive and a leader's socio-emotional behavior as well as follower readiness / maturity for fulfilling a specific function. Sims et al. (2009) found that as a situational leader, one must conduct a strategic approach that involves defining goals, identifying situations, matching leadership styles, and determining how the matching process will be conducted.

FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH NAVIGATING CHANGE

Stress and Crisis

Stress Models and Theoretical Approaches

The terms "crisis" and "stress" are not one in the same. Lyons (2022) outlines the distinctions between stress, which exists as a very normative part of everyday life often serving a very pragmatic, motivational, and / or damaging role to human functioning, compared to crises, which indicate a pile-up of stressors that deplete or exhaust resources and coping mechanisms; and which may ultimately lead to overwhelming an individual, or an organization. Several stress models and theoretical frameworks exist that serve as grounding structures for leaders facing high stress roles or situations. The following stress models are still widely recognized as foundational guiding structures informing the larger body of stress research.

Early studies of stress focus heavily on historical periods related to war, socio-economic declines such as the Great Depression, and family response to overwhelming periods of strain. The research of Angell (1936), Cavan and Ranck (1938) focused on the socio-psychological

effects of stress on families. This research is significant because it was some of the earliest

research involving stress and group functioning or impact.

Hans Selye (1946) is widely known as the founder of stress theory. His model of stress,

known as the General Adaptation Syndrome (GAS) model, notes stress in different stages and

examines how the body reacts to stress across different stages. Selye's research focuses on the

three distinct stages of stress known as the Alarm Reaction Stage, followed by the Resistance

Stage, ending with the Exhaustion Stage.

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) are associated with the Transactional Model of Stress.

According to both Lazarus and Folkman, the focus of this model is on an individual's capacity to

manage challenges based on a series of transactions, or interactions, between an individual and

the outside world. The emphasis of this model is on the balance between navigating challenges

and threats, all within the context of a person's ability to cognitively steer the two effectively.

Several other leading researchers have developed theoretical models and / or

approaches to understanding stress that have continued to emerge over the last thirty years;

however, most have some baseline or thread of similarity in common. Most stress theories

incorporate some element of a physiological, cognitive, and emotional reaction to stress.

Additionally, most emphasize stress as a stimulant that requires some level of response.

Ursin and Eriksen (2004) identified the Cognitive Activation or Stimulus Theory to Stress.

This model emphasizes that stress serves as an alarming or activating stimulus that requires a

level of response in order to restore homeostasis back to its natural state or environment.

Types of Stress

Friedman (1976) is the founding leader in the area of understanding the various types of stress and the nature of the types of stress that impact individuals and groups. Friedman outlines several stress factor categories: physical, psychological, psychosocial, and psychospiritual. He is also credited with connecting stress to each of the five human response categories of cognitive, emotional, behavioral, psychological, and social functions. Friedman notes that stress impacts the individual, to one degree or another, across every function of operating capacity.

Just a few years later, Albrecht (1979) added onto Friedman's categorization of the types of stress by outlining four broad types of stress organized by environment, rather than from a person-centered approach. Albrecht notes time stress, anticipatory stress, situational stress, and encounter stress (which is stress that involves people or interactions). Albrecht's work has remained a key component in the understanding of stress and identifies stress as being an external force that challenges an individual or a group to a response. Albrecht's book, *Stress and the Manager*, has several editions available with the most recent being an edition updated in 2010.

Stress Response

Foundational research on stress and models of stress that are still recognized today frequently harken back to the early research on stress theory and understanding. However, a growing body of research related to individual and / or group response to stress continues to expand. Several theorists have dedicated research to the field of stress response, often referred to as stress management.

Jones (2020) looked at stress response in physicians during COVID-19. He outlines

factors of response associated with stress during a crisis. Notably Jones identified "secondary

trauma (i.e., compassion, fatigue, etc.); a decline in self-care; a sense of a lack of control;

feelings of exhaustion or fatigue; heightened worry about safety and the health of others; and

an inability to meet increased demands or expectations, as impacts often triggered by crisis

response" (n.p).

Elements of stress management have been explored across many fields of research with

two factors most commonly associated with effective stress response: coping and resources.

Zeidner and Saklofske (1996) note two basic types of coping related to stress response:

adaptive and maladaptive coping. The authors explore variations in coping strategies and

outline outcomes associated with each type of coping response, with adaptive coping strategies

as the means most effective in navigating stress.

Burchfield (1997) added to the research of Zeidner and Saklofske by outlining the

importance of resources in stress response. Burchfield argues that individuals are able to

respond to stress in an adaptive or healthy manner (which is what all species are designed to do

in the most basic sense of biological change) or in a maladaptive, unhealthy, or damaging

manner based on the types and quality of resources available to assist in responding to varying

stressors.

Weiten and Lloyd (2008) noted four major types of coping strategies associated with

stress response: appraisal-focused, problem-focused, emotion-focused, and occupational-

focused. Weiten and Lloyd's research organized coping strategies into categories framed with a

broad adaptive context, which emphasized the behavioral, cognitive, and social aspects of coping as a response to stress.

Stress Interventions and Buffering

There are several studies dedicated to the topics of stress interventions, mediations, and buffers for stress. Findings from these studies highlight types of coping strategies that are either biological or psychological in nature (Walsh et al, 2007). According to Walsh, the body reacts to stress via an autonomic response function; whereas the psychological coping response to stress is rooted in problem-solving and management of challenging situations that are cognitive in nature.

Additionally, focused research on workplace stress interventions is extensive. A study by Naghieh and et.al. (2015) focuses on well-being in the workplace and the effectiveness of workplace interventions; Pignata, Boyd and Winefield (2017) note employees' perceptions of stress-reducing interventions that are reported as effective strategies significant to the workplace, while Resptrepo and Lemos (2021) focus on stress management in the workplace associated with various mental and physical health outcomes. Restrepo and Lemos outline types of maladaptive versus adaptive coping strategies and behaviors that align with effective reduction of stress in the workplace.

Findings from various studies agree that healthy coping strategies contribute to long-term stress management and adaptive outcomes for individuals within workplace environments. On the contrary, maladaptive coping strategies are associated with higher employee burnout, fatigue, as well as heightened depression, anxiety, and a generalized feeling of being overwhelmed.

Change Management

During periods of crisis, organizations face an increasing demand to accept change and to undergo transformation. There is an extensive body of research that has explored various models of change, often centered on leadership. Cameron and Green (2019) and outline the top change management models found across the literature. According to CIOpages.com, the various models serve as an organized or structured framework for navigating change. When coalesced and compared, most change management models share a few elements in common, though the frameworks and target audiences may differ. Cameron and Green (2019) and CIOpages.com (2021) contend that the following elements exist across most change management models: (a) they flow through a cycle, levels, or stages; (b) they begin with some level of resistance; (c) resistance is followed by various layers of ambiguity and sense-making; and (d) they ultimately result in some amount of change, or acceptance, on the part of an individual or an organization.

Emotional Response to Change

During times of crisis, acute and heightened emotional responses often emerge. Personal perceptions of situations and events often play a role in the response to stress and change. Several theories explore the role of emotion across varying states of functioning and stress.

Kelley & Conner (1979) were some of the early theorists associated with emotional response to change. Their theory, *The Emotional Cycle of Change*, outlines five stages of emotions that people transition through as they navigate periods of voluntary change: Stage 1-

Uniformed Optimism; Stage 2- Informed Pessimism; Stage 3- Hopeful Realism; Stage 4-

Informed Optimism; and Stage 5- Completion.

The compilation of research of Cherry (2022) outlines that many factors, such as

perception, arousal, stimulation, risk, safety, and threat, all play a role in a person's individual

emotional response to change. Cherry further notes that emotion is linked to both physiological

as well as cognitive processing involving assessment, evaluation, and perception of change; and

that certain types of emotional response are more closely associated with adaptive response

behaviors.

Malik (2022) explores Elizabeth Kubler-Ross' research on the 5 stages of grief as they are

applied within the Change Curve Model of human emotional response to change, to the more

specific and situational landscape of the workplace. According to Malik, individuals navigate

through a series of emotional states and stages as outlined by Kubler Ross (denial, anger,

bargaining, depression, and acceptance) as they process and navigate periods of change.

Workplace Change During Crisis

Literature has emerged examining the influence of COVID-19 on workplace response to

change. The research of Tetrick and Winslow (2015) explores the literature focused on

organizational stress management and interventions, notably resources and demands.

Organizations that incorporate stress management interventions into the culture of their

organization and look to better understand the balance of demands to resources that exist

within the workplace for employees, are associated with higher levels of health, well-being, and

support for individuals.

Lee (2021) explored the psychological effects of the pandemic on organizational transition during the crisis. Her research notes that several areas of psychological transition to change were present that include a focus on emotional response, safety, and organizational support. Findings of her research note a positive correlation between organizational support and perceptions of increased physical and psychological safety. Perceived organizational support in employees was linked to increased social capital, as well as resources in the areas of task support, communication, safety, health, and social support.

PERSISTENCE THROUGH CHANGE

Responding to change, especially during periods of crisis, can be taxing on individuals and groups. Various terms have emerged across the literature aimed at describing responses to change that imply an ability to remain robust, strong, tough, and able to recover during periods of intense challenge. These terms include grit, hardiness, and resilience.

Hardiness

The term "hardy" refers to the physical and mental toughness required to withstand long-lasting and difficult situations. Bartone (2020) outlines eight steps associated with a "hardy" response to the coronavirus. The focus of Bartone's research is on minimizing fears, reducing anxieties, and responding to the realities presented by the threats associated with a health crisis.

Resilience

The term resilience refers to the capacity to recover from challenging situations framed within a mindset of optimism (Perkins-Gough, 2013). Trump and Linkov (2020) examined organizational resilience during COVID-19. Their research focused on organizational mitigation,

recovery, and adaptation in the face of ongoing and tumultuous disruption to operations. They also investigated the role of larger system level decision-making that influences an organization's ability to successfully navigate change. Trump and Linkov found that organizations are still in the process of fully adapting to impacts experienced as a result of the effects of COVID-19 and that these impacts may still be felt for years to come.

Grit

Several researchers have explored the role of grit as it is applied to various individuals and groups across many situational circumstances, including organizational change, leadership, and crisis. Grit refers to the strength and resolve of an individual or an organization demonstrated during a period of heightened pressure and challenge. Duckworth (2016) describes grit as the perseverance and passion a person both possesses and leverages in response to navigating change. Her research aims at guiding individuals of varying ages, backgrounds, and roles by outlining three key elements to grit: sustained interest, sustained effort, and attention to long-term goals.

Gray and Alles (2021) present research on the application of grit to organizational crises and "Black Swan," or uniquely challenging, events such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Gary and Alles examine an organization's ability to survive periods of challenge utilizing two sustainability metrics, the "Going Concern Survivability Index" and the "One Month Resilience Index." They found that organizations that displayed high levels of grit in their response to risk, were more likely to survive the organizational threats imposed during the crisis.

Grit and Leadership

Literature points to a positive correlation between grit and leadership, with adaptive leadership response and productivity increasing in the presence of grit. Stoltz (2015) identifies four main dimensions of grit utilizing the acronym GRIT: growth, resilience, instinct, and tenacity. Stoltz's most current definition of GRIT (2015) emphasizes grit by being defined as persistence that supports sustainability. He further notes that the most robust and effective leaders demonstrate high levels of the aforementioned grit attributes implemented across their leadership qualities, which leads to a culture of grit, higher leadership performance, and increased overall resilience to risk.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

The review of literature suggests that crises create complex contexts for higher education leaders that include uncertainty, emotions, and multiple demands. The decisions leaders make during crises, including how they balance the day-to-day crisis response needs with the long-term institutional strategies, have significant impacts on organizational strategies and the ways in which an institution is able to achieve their goals (Garbuio et al., 2015; Mumford et al., 2000; Wang, 2021). Better understanding of how college leaders responded to the COVID-19 pandemic may offer insight into how leaders made decisions during a complicated and complex time.

To explore the experience of leader decision-making related to leading a college during the COVID-19 pandemic, a qualitative research methodology was designed. Chapter Three will present a discussion of the methodology, including data collection procedures, participant sampling, and an analysis designed to answer four key research questions.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

INTRODUCTION

As future community college leaders prepare for transition into the role of president / CEO, there remains a need for aspiring leaders and hiring groups to better understand the swiftness of change in higher education and the willingness to adapt with very little notice in order to fulfil the mission of the college when faced with various challenges. (Krishnamurthy, 2020). The purpose of this study is to examine the skills, capabilities, competencies, and strategies that a president demonstrates in leading a rural community college through a prolonged crisis.

This chapter will outline the qualitative research methodology and the study design used to capture the lived experiences through a descriptive phenomenological framework of eight rural Illinois community college presidents who led their institutions through the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. The key elements of human science research as a rationale for the study will be discussed. These elements include the research population, demographics of subjects, data collection process, data analysis approach, and the roles of the researchers will all be described. Finally, ethical considerations will be identified.

Action research is often suitable for inquiry-based exploration of human subjects (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). This allows researchers the ability to better understand phenomena observed in the social world and to apply understanding that is rooted in constructing meaning

about human behavior. The goal of action-based research is practical application that can be used to inform future practice or decision-making (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), "action research is a type of research that is practitioner focused and which seeks to understand how participants approach a particular problem within their organization. It aims to extract meaning from a situation used to solve a practical problem" (p. 49).

TYPE OF STUDY

The type of study that was used to expand understanding of information related to rural community college presidents' response to COVID-19 is that of a cohort study with a focus on lived experience told through personal life stories (van Manen, 1997). The larger methodological approach to this study is a descriptive or interpretive study concentrated on the action behind the participants' responses to the phenomenon. According to van Manen (1997), one way of collecting personal experiences is to conduct recorded conversations with persons who have lived through shared or similar events. For this study, the researchers elected to focus on a selective sampling so as to minimize variability in the participant responses.

RESEARCH PARADIGM

This study was conceptualized using a constructivist research paradigm. The essence behind the constructivist model is that new information is constructed and rooted in a grounded theoretical approach (Mills, Bonner & Francis, 2006). Grounded theory assumes that limited information is currently known about a topic and that the researcher sits at the helm of constructing new information through exploratory research. Grounded theory positions the

researcher as the "lead author of a construction of experiences and meaning" intended to further knowledge about a phenomenon (p. 26).

The constructivist perspective, often associated with qualitative research, is the chosen research method for this study. Qualitative research is "focused on discovery, insight, and understanding from the perspectives of those being studied [and of which] offers the greatest promise of making a difference in people's lives" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 1). More specifically, this research is a phenomenological study that is rooted in a hermeneutic emphasis. Phenomenology is a philosophical belief that all occurrences, situations, events, and sensations are distinct. Essentially phenomenology can be thought of as the theory of something being unique and can be applied to this study in the sense that the researchers were interested in capturing the unique essence of the COVID-19 lived experience for the participants, specific to this research (van Manen, 1997).

This study was conceptualized using a constructivist research paradigm and was built upon the concept of hermeneutic phenomenology. Hermeneutic phenomenology, originated from German theorist and theologist Martin Heidegger in the early 20th century, is focused on the existential and authentic way of being in the world (Laverty, 2003). For the purposes of this study, hermeneutic phenomenology is the philosophical approach that centers on how meaning about lived experience is made. According to van Manen (1997), "We can best understand human beings from the experiential reality of their life worlds" (preface p. 1). The researchers employed hermeneutic phenomenology as a way to derive meaning from the narrative inquiry of the participants. Narrative inquiry based in storytelling, is the strategy by

which researchers extrapolate personal accounts of existential meaning about the lived experience of their participants (van Manen, 1997).

One of the goals of engaging in hermeneutic/phenomenological inquiry is the underlying attention to understanding the properties or qualities necessary for an experience to be lived. According to van Manen (1997), it is worthwhile to explore the properties/qualities that belong to the existence of any entity such that the entity would not exist should those properties or qualities be removed. We can apply this rationale to the study of rural presidents/CEOs in the sense that our goal is to better understand the themes that emerged during our data collection that uniquely describe, through semiotic language, the lived experiences of the rural community college presidents who participated in this study.

GOALS OF THE RESEARCH STUDY

The goal of this research is to carefully examine and develop an in-depth understanding of what a few rural community college leaders experienced during the COVID-19 crisis, and to identify themes that emerged in order to drive future research about leadership during a prolonged crisis response. This research also seeks to identify competencies that can be utilized by other rural community college presidents when navigating a prolonged crisis situation in the future.

The rationale for the study is both fundamental in nature, intended to grow understanding of a new phenomenon; it is also applied as the information gathered is intended to help inform future leaders. The following research questions were used to guide the researchers in exploring the prior training the CEOs had going into the pandemic, the resources

and supports utilized, the initial decisions made by the leaders, and the overall effects the crisis

had on each leader as an individual.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How do crisis management training and/or experience affect a community college president's practices in an actual crisis?

2. What resources and support systems prove to be valuable and essential for a community college president when facing a crisis?

3. What initial actions, decisions, and behaviors drive a community college president when first faced with a crisis?

4. What factors affected the president's personal leadership experience?

STUDY SETTING

Community college presidents identified from two Illinois Community College Board

(ICCB) peer groups, peer group I and peer group II, defined as serving fewer than 4,000 students

and located in an area of less than 50,000 people, which served as the natural setting for this

research. Each of the eight presidents who participated in the study led a rural institution from

within one of the two focus peer groups identified by researchers, based on ICCB classification

as defined by three factors: Enrollment, geographic rurality, and funding tied to the institutions'

taxable funding districts (ICCB, 2019).

PARTICIPANT SELECTION/SAMPLING METHOD

The participants for this study were selected using purposeful sampling. This allowed

the researchers the ability to select participants with similar characteristics and background

criteria. In this study, rural community college leaders employed under the broader Illinois

community college governance structure were selected. Presidents of Illinois rural community

colleges that serve 50,000 or fewer residents in their district and fewer than 3,000 students, as

reported by the Illinois Community College Board (ICCB) fall 2019 enrollment report were

chosen (ICCB, 2021b.)

The sample of presidents chosen for this study were selected using a strategy of

purposive sampling. Purposive sampling is an approach that allows the researchers to select

participants based on like criteria (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill (2012)). The selected

participants fall under two similar peer groups as designated by ICCB.

In addition to the participants being from the two ICCB peer groups, the participants

have additional demographic features in common: all had served as president for fewer than 10

years and all were serving in their first presidency. All participants were existing CEOs, rather

than New CEOs, as described by the American Association of Community Colleges (2018)

classification of CEOs. All participants were of similar demographic make-up, with gender being

the one exception; the researchers did not differentiate for this variable in the data analysis.

Finally, all presidents were serving in their first presidencies and actively serving as president of

their institution at the time of this study.

Table 1. Study Participants, Demographic Characteristics

PARTICIPANT/ CEO	PEER GROUP	COLLEGE PSEUDONYM	RACE/SEX	YEAR OF HIRE / YEARS IN PRESIDENCY AT THE BEGINNING OF THE PANDEMIC
President Cloud	I	College S	White/Female	2020 / 1 year (interim)
President Rain	I	College C	White/Male	2018 / 2 years
President Rays	I	College E	White/Male	2010 / 10 years
President Eye	II	College K	White/Male	2018 / 2 years
President Breeze	II	College W	White/Female	2016 / 4 years

Participant/ CEO	Peer Group	College Pseudonym	Race/Sex	Year of Hire / Years in Presidency at the Beginning of the Pandemic
President Nature	II	College D	White/Male	2016 / 4 years
President Hail	II	College V	White/Male	2015 / 5 years
President Wind	II	College R	White/Male	2012 / 8 years

DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURES

According to van Manen (1997), "We gather data of other people's experiences because they allow us to become more experienced ourselves" (p. 62). Because this is a phenomenological study of lived experience, the researchers concluded that the best approach to gaining the most authentic feedback of the experiences for each president in the study, was to gather data about their experiences through guided interviews steered loosely by the researchers through a series of 10-12 open-ended questions. For this study, semi-structured interviews were conducted via video conferences that were digitally recorded utilizing Zoom as the communication platform. In semi-structured interviews, the researchers follow a set of guided interview questions, but the questions are not intended to be exhaustive nor restrictive to the interview process. Rather, the semi-structured interviews are intended to allow each participant to expand upon questioning in as much detail as they feel is relevant to the topic of the interview.

During the interviews, the researchers asked follow-up questions aimed at encouraging elaboration and clarification. Interviews were digitally recorded for accuracy, and the researchers used an additional software program, TechSmith Knowmia, to electronically transcribe the recorded interviews.

METHODS OF ANALYSIS

In interview-based qualitative research, the researchers served as the primary data collection instrument that was used for this study. The co-researchers on this study played an equally integral and shared role in the data collection process. Each researcher collaborated and were in mutual agreement about every decision made related to the methodology and data collection process.

Further, through the storytelling narratives shared by these eight rural presidents, we seek to describe the essence of their lived experience applied to the unique features of the role of the president during a crisis. To capture this essence, we have identified a set of shared meanings, organized by themes, that were communicated by the participants via semi-structured, in-depth interviews. By capturing the presidents' perceptions through the story of this period of the global health crisis, we were able to formulate a larger picture of the existential lived experiences for rural presidents during this specific event, and the situational timeline, of the first year of COVID-19.

By selecting participants who share common features of leadership and classification, the researchers were able to organize themes that emerged from the data as a way to apply meaning from the findings that could be used to later inform other future leaders with similar backgrounds. Presidents of the community colleges involved in relation to the focus of this study have been identified based on the researchers' personal knowledge of their previous and current work assignments at these organizations. The study used a purposive sampling approach aimed at interviewing 7—10 institutional representatives. Purposive sampling is a

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sampling strategy whereby the researchers select participants using their own subjective

judgment, as a way to target a particular population of interest to sample. Purposive sampling

is not a randomized method for sampling participants (Sanders, Lewis, & Thornhill (2012).

The time frame associated with the study is the first year of leadership of the pandemic.

This date can be conceptualized as the beginning of March 2020 through the end of March

2021.

The data were analyzed according to a process of verbatim transcription, followed by

coding of the literal word-for-word responses that were then sorted by research question. This

deductive approach allowed the researchers to retain the accuracy of the transcribed

responses, while also organizing the participants' feedback by category. In the second step, the

researchers used an inductive coding process, based on the data to then assign themes to the

verbatim text already sorted by research question.

Inductive coding is a data analysis strategy that is often utilized in qualitative research

and involves identifying categories of information or themes as part of a process for developing

a deeper understanding to a question or a phenomenon that is not yet understood (Thomas,

2003). Inductive coding is a ground-up process of analyzing data.

Using thematic analysis, the researchers read through the text of the transcribed data

derived from the in-depth interviews. From there, they extrapolated patterns of meaning that

emerged across the data that they assigned into coded themes: "A theme refers to an element

which occurs frequently within the text" (van Manen, 1997). Thematic analysis allowed the

process to be largely researcher-driven in terms of assigning meaning to the responses of the

lived experience across multiple participants. This flexible approach was particularly useful in

exploring categorization of phenomenological data given the largely under-researched nature

of this specific topic for rural community college presidents (van Manen, 1997).

VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY

VALIDITY

Validity in qualitative research refers to the integrity and application of the methods

used, along with the accuracy of the findings as they reflect back on the data (Long & Johnson,

2000; Whittemore, Chase, & Mandle, 2001). According to Leung (2015), validity in qualitative

research depends upon

> whether the research question is valid for the desired outcome, the choice of
> methodology is appropriate for answering the research question(s), the design is valid
> for the methodology, the sampling and data analysis is appropriate, and finally the
> results and conclusions are valid for the sample and context. (p. 325)

For this study, the researchers incorporated multiple measures to ensure that the

integrity of the methodological approach was respected throughout the process. First, the

researchers were concerned with whether or not the study fairly and accurately demonstrated

what actually existed (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Second, the researchers paid careful attention to

whether or not the qualitative methodology, specifically the in-depth interviews, measured

what they intended to measure.

To gauge whether or not the study demonstrated what actually existed, the researchers

allowed the participants to self-describe their lived experiences, openly, and then without

modification to the responses, the researchers used those transcribed responses to construct a

larger narrative about the experiences that rural Illinois community college presidents lived

during the crisis. Next, to determine whether or not the data collection process measured what

it was intended to measure, the researchers chose to rely on the strength of the guided

parameters to loosely anchor the semi-structured interviews. This provided a framework of

consistency to the interviews which encouraged stability of questioning across participants. To

strengthen the integrity and credibility of the findings, the researchers chose to interview

participants who were actively leading during the most critical period of the crisis, and they

chose to obtain first-hand accounts of the experiences from the leaders themselves

(Whittemore, Chase, & Mandel, 2001).

Carter et al., (2014) explains investigator triangulation is when two researchers study

the same topic and multiple observations and conclusions are available to confirm results and

findings from various views. Finally, as a way to strengthen the validity of the research, the

researchers engaged in a type of data norming process known as data normalization. This

element of shared collaboration, whereby researchers first review the data and examine for

categories and themes independently; and then swap the data to validate and align findings,

was applied to both the data collection and the data analysis processes. Normalization added a

layer of confirmation of accuracy to both the data collection and analysis, which ultimately

served to enhance the validity of the findings.

RELIABILITY

Reliability in qualitative research refers to the stability and appropriateness of the data

collection process as applied across multiple data sets. In consideration for insurance of

reliability, the researchers chose to apply parameters of consistency across the breadth of the

analytical process (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To do this, they were careful to select a participant

sample intended to strengthen the types of responses solicited. The researchers selected

participants all from the same state or geographic location, similar institution type and size, similar rural designation, and similar leadership position.

Additionally, the researchers chose to apply similar methods of measurement across both the data collection and analysis process. By using guided interviews as well as incorporating similar approaches to the coding and analysis process, the researchers increased the reliability of the study through the limiting of diverse application procedures.

PARAMETERS OF STUDY

DELIMITATIONS

Delimitations refer to areas of boundary, control, or restriction as determined by the researcher(s) and applied to the research process. The delimitations for this study include elements of exclusion, as well as areas not studied.

The researchers chose not to examine a few specific elements, imposed primarily for practical and geographic reasons. Spoon River College was excluded from Peer Group Listing I because the president of that college served as a primary researcher on this study. Other boundaries established by the researchers focused on populations not studied in terms of the scope of the research. These included: colleges outside of the state of Illinois: any urban / suburban / or metropolitan institutions within Illinois: any four-year colleges / universities within the state of Illinois: and any of the other peer groupings as designated by the Illinois Community College Board (ICCB). The researchers set these restrictions on the study because they felt that expanding beyond the ICCB Peer Groupings I and II would change the geographic rural and size parameters of the study.

Variables such as time, in reference to the period of the first year of the pandemic as timeframe of focus for this study; as well as gender and other demographic variables were also excluded as elements of focus for the data analysis component of the methodology.

Finally, the methodologies not used for this study included case studies and any quantitative measures. The researchers chose to exclude these methods because they were interested in-depth information from a small select sample; and they were not interested in defining the lived experiences of the participants through any type of singular case-study, defined survey, or questionnaire instrument.

LIMITATIONS

Limitations in research describe elements of the methodology process that impact the findings of the research outside of the control of the researcher(s). There were several limitations noted in this study.

First, one community college (Peer Group I) as well as one community college (Peer Group II), were both excluded from this study as neither responded to the request to interview after multiple outreach attempts by the researchers. It is also worth noting that the president of S Community College was serving as an interim president during the timeframe that this study is focused, and although the participant was no longer in the role of president of S Community College at the time of the data collection phase, the researchers felt that she remained an appropriate participant to interview.

The loss of participants from two institutions within the peer groupings, arguably three with the exclusion of Spoon River College, limited the sample size of the study and restricted the researchers from gathering as much data from the sample population as may have been

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possible. While it is reasonable to suggest that the loss of 3/11 participants had an influence on the findings of the study, the variation in the lived experiences described by the eight participants led the researchers to remain confident that they gathered enough data to establish recurring conclusions. However, sample size, particularly in a qualitative research study where in-depth interviews were employed, always limits the significance of the conclusions drawn simply by nature of the limit to the participants sampled.

The use of a virtual telecommunication platform (Zoom) to conduct the participant interviews was another limit to the study. While the use of Zoom was applied to all interviews, establishing consistency across the data collection process, this platform for data collection can be inherently limiting in nature because it does not create an authentic, in-person interview experience. Because this study was being conducted post-COVID, and at a time when reliable access to conducting in-person interviews was limited, it is worth noting that access to face-to-face interviewing was not possible. However, the video aspect of the interviews did allow for the gathering of non-verbal cues of communication. It also created a simulated face-to-face engagement process.

A third limitation of the study related to the lack of prior research that currently exists on this topic. To date, there is very little research, specifically studies that could be replicated, that exist that would add to the reliability of the research and provide valuable foundational / contextual data on leading a rural institution through a pandemic.

Finally, a limitation of the research relates to the potential flaws that naturally occur with a self-reported data collection process. These include, but are not limited, to: The potential for selective memory to present in the reflective story-telling process; the presence of

telescoping of information which relates to the recalling of events applied to one period of time, even though they may have occurred at another period of time; the communication of false attribution(s) whereby positive events in the story-telling process are attributed to the participants' own agencies or leadership, while at the same time negative attributions are applied to events or decisions that occurred external from the leaders' own agencies or discretion; and the potential for the exaggeration of events or elements of the lived experience-for instance exaggerated emotions or perceptions as related to specific elements of the event / crisis.

RESEARCHERS' BIASES AND ASSUMPTIONS

There were several cultural biases and assumptions that are worth noting that may have impacted the findings of this study.

First, both co-researchers on this study currently serve in active leadership roles within the state of Illinois at institutions within the ICCB peer groups of focus. Both researchers have a combined 37 years of experience in higher education. Researcher Curt Oldfield holds over 9 years of direct experience as the president of Spoon River College, and a total of 22 years of service within higher education. He has served the entirety of his career at rural institutions. Researcher Shelley Barkley holds over 10 years of experience in her role as a Dean of Academics at Sauk Valley Community College and over 15 years' experience in higher education. She also has served the majority of her career in higher education at rural institutions.

Second in terms of the research, the co-researchers conducted the data collection and analysis of participants who are peers / colleagues and/or who serve in a supervisory leadership role in relation to the researchers. Curt Oldfield is an actively serving Illinois community college

president whose home institution, Spoon River College, falls in ICCB Peer Group I. Shelley

Barkley currently serves as dean of Academics at Sauk Valley Community College, which falls

under ICCB Peer Group II, and from which one of the study participants is president and

Shelley's supervisor. As a result, this sample offered enhanced access to and willingness on the

part of the participants to serve as subjects for the research, but with that access came a

natural level of bias and subjectivity on the part of the researchers based on their relations to

the participants sampled.

Last, the fact that the researchers chose to narrow the scope of their focus on rural

serving institutions within the state of Illinois can be directly attributed to the subjective biases

of the researchers who not only serve in rural designated institutions within their own roles,

but to the fact that both researchers hold a subjective interest in leadership associated with

rural designated institutions.

SUMMARY

This chapter outlined the research methodology used to explore the lived experiences

of eight Illinois community college presidents who served as CEOs of rural institutions during

the COVID-19 crisis. The methodology chosen for this study was a qualitative research design

using semi-structured interviews as the primary measurement for data collection. The selection

of an action-based research study centered on the lived experience of human subjects was

designed to fill a gap in the larger conversation about leadership during a crisis.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents the research findings and analysis that were derived from the eight in-depth interviews conducted by the researchers.

OVERVIEW OF THE RESEARCH STUDY

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to carefully examine and develop an in-depth understanding of what a few rural community college leaders experienced during the COVID-19 crisis, and to identify themes that emerged in order to drive future research about leadership during a prolonged crisis response.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The researchers were interested in gaining a deeper understanding of the ways that the first year of COVID-19 influenced the presidents' leadership. The interviews were structured around these four topics: Preparation for crisis management, leadership competencies (actions, behaviors, decisions) the participants presented in response to the crisis, resources and support systems that aided the participants' response to the crisis, and the effects of the crisis on the leader as an individual. The following research questions were designed to increase understanding of the leadership experiences that presidents faced during this time.

1. How do crisis management training and/or experience affect a community college president's practices in an actual crisis?

2. What resources and support systems prove to be valuable and essential for a community college president when facing a crisis?

3. What initial actions, decisions, and behaviors drive a community college president when first faced with a crisis?

4. What factors affected the president's personal leadership experience?

PARTICIPANT OVERVIEW

The researchers conducted in-depth interviews with eight community college presidents within the state of Illinois. All eight participants in the study are present or former interim college presidents who led their institution during the first year of COVID-19 global pandemic. All of the presidents are from rural community colleges in Illinois.

The participants were selected using a purposive sampling technique for the goal of collecting data from a group of presidents with similar criteria in common. The researchers selected a sample of participants from two rural Illinois community college ICCB peer groups. Of the eleven possible presidents that comprise the two peer groups, eight presidents agreed to participate in the interview process. Two presidents were not able to be reached for response and one president was excluded due to his role as a researcher for the study. Table 1 (see Chapter Three) provides an overview to the participants' demographics and institution.

Background

As of March 2020, the start of the COVID-19 pandemic for community colleges in the State of Illinois, the participants entered into leadership responses to the crisis with varying years of service in their role as president. The following metrics outline certain demographic criteria relevant to previous leadership experience at the onset of the pandemic response.

- For all eight of the presidents, their institution at the start of the pandemic falls into the category of their first time holding the position of president.

- None have served in the role of president for any other institution prior to their current position and tenure in the role.

- Four out of the eight presidents have been in the role of president for less than five years, while three of the eight have served in the role for five to ten years, and one has been in the role for greater than ten years.

The pathway to the presidency also varied for each of the presidents. Work experience associated with the pathway to the presidency reported by the participants were academic experience or industry/workforce experience or a combination of both, as well as none or some prior administrative leadership experience. Table 2 provides a snapshot of the participants' leadership experience.

- Four out of the eight participants made their way to the presidency by way of prior academic work experience, while the other four stepped into their current role having held both academic and industry / workforce experience.

- Presidents Hail, Rays, Cloud, and Wind reported their pathway to the presidency through the academic work experience, while Presidents Eye, Breeze, Rain, and Nature noted their pathway to the presidency included both academic and industry / workforce experience.

- Five out of the eight presidents noted prior administrative leadership experience prior to stepping into the role of president, while three out of the eight presidents stated that they stepped into the role with little to no prior administrative leadership experience.

- Presidents Hail, Cloud, Breeze, Rain, and Nature stepped into their roles as president with prior administrative leadership experience, most commonly through the rank of vice president prior to the presidency. Presidents Eye, Rays, and Wind noted stepping into their roles as president from a non-administrative position, most commonly through the faculty chair ranks.

Table 2. Participants' Presidential and Leadership Experience

PARTICIPANT/ CEO	YEAR OF HIRE / YEARS IN PRESIDENCY AT THE BEGINNING OF THE PANDEMIC	FIRST PRESIDENCY	PATHWAY / PREVIOUS ADMINISTRATIVE EXPERIENCE
President Cloud	2020 / 1 year (interim)	Yes	• Academic • Prior Admin.

Participant/ CEO	Year of Hire / Years in Presidency at the beginning of the pandemic	First Presidency	Pathway / Previous Administrative Experience
President Rain	2018 / 2 years	Yes	• Academic / Industry • Prior Admin
President Rays	2010 / 10 years	Yes	• Academic • No Prior Admin
President Eye	2018 / 2 years	Yes	• Academic / Industry • No Prior Admin
President Breeze	2016 / 4 years	Yes	• Academic / Industry • Prior Admin
President Nature	2016 / 4 years	Yes	• Academic / Industry • Prior Admin
President Hail	2015 / 5 years	Yes	• Academic • Prior Admin
President Wind	2012 / 8 years	Yes	• Academic • No Prior Admin

STUDY RESULTS

In the remainder of this chapter, the interview discussions will be reported and discussed as they pertain to the study's research questions.

RESEARCH QUESTION #1: RESULTS

Research Question #1 focused on the participants' previous crisis management training and experience. In response to this research question, the participants reported two main types of prior experience that they brought to the role of the presidency at the start of the COVID-19 response. Two sub-themes emerged from the types of experience reported: Prior lived experience relative to crisis response and/or training related to crisis response. Three

categories or types of experience were noted: Prior background experience, formal training, and informal training.

Table 3. Research Question #1: Previous Crisis Management Training and Experiences

INTERVIEW THEMES	RESPONSE CATEGORIES	KEY WORDS
• Formal Training • Informal Training	• References / Resources • Modes	• Sources • Trainings • Background • Technology • Other Crisis Situations

Formal and Informal Training

Several of the participants had previous formal and informal training prior to the COVID 19 global pandemic and some referenced how it influenced the organization and outcomes of the crisis response team.

President Rays:
I've taught a graduate class for a local University as an adjunct in crisis management. I was teaching that class at the same time as this was taking place. We really embrace emergency management; we really embrace that at Southeastern and fire Science Academy and again National Incident Management System (NIMS) training.

I've got good instincts about this kind of stuff. I have some background in Emergency Management. I was the Public Information Officer (PIO) at [College], so I served on the tabletop emergency planning at [College] and also did the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) NIMS training. What's interesting if you participated in those for it is that they have a very well scripted structure for how they go about managing a crisis event.

I tapped into a number of other resources that maybe some people didn't, and that is the Graduate University College Dublin, which is one of the biggest universities in Europe. I also tapped into some pieces that they had where they brought in alumni or top leaders. One of the top leaders in the World Health Organization is a graduate, and so I sat in on some of those seminars. I've been part of the Harvard Presidents' Group, and they did an emergency piece with Larry Bacow and a couple of other top university presidents. I also utilized a couple of things on LinkedIn that were related to the Nigeria

Crisis and top leadership pieces from a variety of different industries and so, I participated in those seminars and those were good.

President Eye:
My experiences with the National Incident Management System (NIMS) incident command guided my response.

President Wind:
We have emergency and business continuity plans and stuff that sit nicely on a shelf in a binder somewhere. And the first in one of my comments to everybody was "we can go get that" because that was asked of me, and I said, "then we can throw it away because we didn't write anything for this pandemic." It's [the crisis] just problem solving, and I think it's still an estimation of what you're really facing and finding a way to address it.

Previous Experience and Informal Training

Two presidents referred to their previous lived experiences when sharing their story of

leadership during the COVID 19 global pandemic.

President Rays:
We've lived through a tornado, which hit campus years ago. You know there's sort of a road map out there for that, but a global pandemic when it comes across, you know, once every century does not have a road map.

President Breeze:
So, I would say that some of it is related to my previous institution and my lived experience being on that executive leadership team.

Two presidents also shared their observations of other leaders or a connection from a

previous career and how those events guided their leadership.

President Eye:
Dwight Eisenhower is my favorite president, as he said, "Surround yourself with smart people and let them do their job and support them." He's right. You know, everybody thinks he [Eisenhower] was the mastermind of the day. I mean, he was the one who gave the "go or no-go" on D-Day, but behind him was a series of strong leaders all the way down. You know they even tested the sand of the beach to make sure they were on solid ground when they landed. All of that matters.

President Breeze:
I began by analyzing the situation and asking, "What are the strengths that people on the team bring?"

As too in counseling [I have a Master's degree in counseling], it often comes down to just the ability to listen…. You don't have to agree with people, but they have to feel like they've been heard, and I do that.

I feel like I do that, and that's probably part of the reason why they haven't run me out of town. It was because they know I'm hearing them. Many hands make the work lighter. Make sure you develop a good team. Have people there to help you and encourage you and support you. Surround yourself with people you trust and who can get the work done with you, and who are aligned in your mission. So yeah, I think by being a good communicator overall, and being a good team builder, and getting the right people, and listening: I don't know what you can't do.

RESEARCH QUESTION #1: ANALYSIS

As is apparent from respondents' comments, these leaders benefited from having formal crisis training, and previous lived experiences provided valuable lessons for them. While not trained for a global pandemic, the leaders shared that the skills and knowledge from prior crisis training carried over to their management of teams during the COVID- 19 global pandemic. Areas that leaders highlighted as beneficial included risk assessment, selecting team leaders, internal and external communication strategies, and resource management.

These comments reinforced the research of Van Wart and Kapucu (2011) when they asked participants about key leadership competencies needed for successful crisis management and found that three central competencies areas were required: First, strong and calm leadership with a willingness to assume responsibility, resilience, communication skills, and the ability to articulate a vision and mission. Next, rational and sensible decisions-making while taking into consideration time and resource constraints. Third, adaptive coordination that includes team building, operations planning, social skills and partnering.

The discussions with the presidents also sought to answer the following research question: What resources and support systems prove to be valuable and essential for a community college president when facing a crisis? In response to this research question, the participants shared internal and external resources they referenced for support while facing the COVID-19 global pandemic. Two categories of external and internal resources emerged as the types of groups that served as valuable resources and support to the response: (1) Advisory groups whose role was to make recommendations to the president and executive leadership teams, and (2) working groups whose role served to drive decisions relevant to the response.

Table 4. Research Question #2: Resources and Support Systems

INTERVIEW THEMES	RESPONSE CATEGORIES	KEY WORDS
External	• Advisory • Working- Drivers of Decisions	• ICCB • Federal/ Governmental Agencies • Local / National News • Peers / Mentors
Internal	• Advisory • Working- Drivers of Decisions	• Board of Trustees • Cabinet • Leadership Teams • Emergency Management Teams / Manuals

External Resources / Supports

Seven of the respondents shared how they used external resources such as global media outlets, federal government agencies, State of Illinois updates, local news, and building a network of peers to make necessary decisions in response to the COVID-19 global pandemic.

President Cloud:
The governor had a five-stage plan of reopening, and so we structured our return to campus plan really had to be based on that because he laid out the ground rules by which we could return and open up the campus.

We talked collectively as [regional] presidents, and the Illinois Community College Board Director would have meetings with us, I think once a week, and then once a week with all the presidents. So, we would collectively do this, which I think is great because then, we're all addressing issues similarly, and I think that's very important. We've got the collective […] mind of all the presidents.

It really was driven by the governor's office and then, as a state agency, we then addressed some of what he had to do in his plan. So, we really had to address those issues as we created our plans. But it was the collective mind of all the presidents that I think it enabled us to be as successful as we are.

Another resource that was highlighted by President Cloud:
We really had to work with our attorney to determine legally who could stay home and who couldn't and go through every single request. We used the CDC site, so we actually abided by their laws and ADA laws.

President Rain:
I was following the news in November and December about what was coming out of Wuhan [China] and I was paying attention to that.

I listen to a lot of international news, and because international news coverage of the event was a lot different to American news coverage of the event, I began very quickly to learn about the seriousness of the virus.

President Rays:
My peers were a great resource.

President Eye:
[The Executive Director of Illinois Community College Board (ICCB)] did a pretty good job of communicating with us weekly. ICCB and our peers or what other people are doing definitely helped stuff and tweaked it to the rural community. So, I mean, that was definitely a strong resource for us as well.

President Hail:
I thought we got very good guidance from our County Department of Health, from the Illinois Department of Health, from the Governor's office, from the CDC, along with the Risk Management consortium.

President Nature:
The leader was our head of human resources, and she really was working from the outset with our County Health Department, and that is maybe the one good thing about this was the relationship that they started to cultivate back in March of 2020 has blossomed.

President Wind:
We used the guidance the state community college president's task force put out, and so I think a lot of that helped immerse me into conversations with colleagues and with [the Executive Director of ICCB]. We also used the Department of Health and the CDC guidelines. Also, I was on the COVID Safe Return Panel for the ICCB and the Board of Higher Ed.

Internal Resources

Several respondents shared internal resources they utilized to formulate decisions. The

resources that were primarily identified were individuals or groups that the presidents

consulted during the response.

President Cloud:
The faculty union was consulted. Everybody has a different set of lenses that they see through, and so we need all those people at the table.

I couldn't imagine going through the pandemic without my administrative assistant. She's fantastic, and she was here nearly every day with me.

President Rain:
We really mobilized student affairs and we reached out to students to find out quickly what students needed, and we were able to ascertain very very quickly. We were concerned about the online piece.

President Rays:
A proactive team — whether it be Internet solutions, training, our Online and Media Services department — were utilized, and a risk management team was enacted and really integrated them.

My cabinet has my vice president of academics, my executive dean of Academic Services, my executive dean of Student Services, my executive dean of Business Services. So, CFO, CSO, CIO, and executive dean of Academics. I'm on that and then a couple other support staff members. So, we try to keep it fairly small because you know you get 20 to 25 and you just can't function well. I was very proud they worked well and were very cohesive. The Marketing and Communications director and Public

Information person were key in helping to communicate messages to students and community.

President Breeze:
We have a very functional, high-performing team, and everybody knows their roles and they're great at working together.

President Eye:
[We had an] Emergency Management plan in place, and we basically took our incident command team for what would be implemented in case of a school shooter or another disaster. You know we have railroad tracks right next door and so we prepare for potential hazards related to massive derailment. I think we had 14 people on it, so [our incident command team] was all of our senior leaders who are the deans and vice presidents. And then we also focused on the student services side where we knew that there were going to be challenges. There's going to be a struggle, and we would start troubleshooting [by asking], "Who's going to start struggling in this remote environment, and what can we do to get the resources to those students?"

President Hail:
I think we do a good job of keeping our mission, vision, and values front and center, and so we referenced those often during this pandemic. In part of our values, we state that we care about every person, and we would emphasize that to people, how we need to take care of us. So, every cabinet member has their own expertise, and they would be looking; they would be drilling down into their resources. It was also very lucky because we had really good people in place. For example, the director of IT & Security, who I've mentioned, was in charge of Emergency Management.

President Nature:
We needed to build a guiding coalition, and we also needed them to communicate that as well as we could.

President Wind:
I had good, competent people around me. We were all hands-on-deck and then identified what we needed to handle. Individuals were in charge of student services, academic affairs, and the business office —which includes safety.

Additional Supports

President Cloud:
We actually got a TV installed in my office. I watched CNN to see the COVID numbers, so that helped me. I also went to the CDC site for up-to-date information.

President Rain:
[I focused] much more on "who are the key people that we need at various levels of the organization?" Again, the Emergency Management team was key, but I'm also a logic science kind of person: I was on the John Hopkins site every single day.

President Rays:
[I relied on] the textbook that I was using to teach my master's degree class. I highlighted much more than normal. I went back to re-highlight and reread. The textbook is by Crandall, Parnell, and Spillin titled *Crisis Management: Leading in the New Strategy Landscape*. So, this was my Bible. I'll tell you, yes, I applied it to our own response to the pandemic in our crisis management plan.

President Eye:
We've taken a lot of incident command coursework and training together, and it really kind of kicked into our own incident command work.

President Hail:
We also made sure that we had resources available to people. For example, counseling resources. We made sure those were available and that people could access those confidentially because we didn't know necessarily how people were reacting to this.

President Nature:
The County Health Department was the ultimate arbiter every time we had COVID cases; every time we had a quarantine, we would go to them, not me.

President Wind:
A key source? [My] executive leadership team.

RESEARCH QUESTION #2: ANALYSIS

To make sense of a crisis, leaders work to find ways to understand the situation, gain control, and initiate action. Hemmer and Elliff (2020) explained that school leaders responding to Hurricane Harvey faced a highly complex crisis situation. In the Hurricane Harvey crisis, the researchers found that the challenges leaders faced ranged from the technical challenges to highly adaptive responses. Because of the range of challenges and the adaptiveness required, Hemmer and Elliff (2020) found that sensemaking helped leaders to be flexible and make quick decisions. Walker et al. (2016) also noted that crisis leaders not only have many decisions to

make but also have the pressure of the media, of understanding their organizations, and of consuming accurate information.

It was clear from the interview conversations that the presidents responded to the COVID-19 global pandemic as an environmental crisis that was impacting every operation of the college. The participants recognized that this global pandemic had a larger impact on the internal and external operations of the institution, and each president responded by engaging multiple units across the college to develop solutions for challenges as they arose. After President Trump and Governor Pritzker declared COVID-19 a global pandemic and a state disaster, the responsibility of these presidents to respond in a timely, and safe, manner increased significantly.

RESEARCH QUESTION #3: RESULTS

The interviews also focused on the third research question: What initial actions, decisions, and behaviors drive a community college president when first faced with a crisis? In discussing this topic, the participants shared experiences involving communication and decision-making strategies that they employed during the response to the COVID-19 global pandemic.

Table 5. Research Question #3: Communication and Decision-Making Strategies

Interview Themes	Response Categories	Key Words
Communication Strategies		
Communication Style	• Transactional • Collaborative	• Direct • Collaborative • Transparency • Honesty • Authentic • Caring • Consistent / Regular • Often / Frequent
Flow of Information	• Singular • Multimodal	• Funneling • Hierarchy • Structure
Information Gathering (Inputs)	• Shared • Expanded • Reduced Sources • Advisory versus Working Groups	• Collaboration • Internal/ External Sources • "Rooted in Science" • Expanded Teams • Inclusive Input • COVID/ Emergency Teams
Information Sharing (Outputs)	• Advisory versus Working Groups • Modes	• Communication Teams • Expanded Teams • Mission / Vision / Values • Meetings • Memos • Emails • Presidential Updates • Website • Social Media • Text Messaging
Socio-Emotional Element	• Feelings • Culture • Trust • Belonging / Support	• Empathy • Care • Criticism • Judgment • Perceptions • Emotional Regulation • Trust

Interview Themes	Response Categories	Key Words
Data- Institutional Knowledge	• Logging Information • Tracking Information	• Logs • Meeting minutes • Timeline
DECISION-MAKING STRATEGIES		
Style	• Top Down • Bottom Up • Collaborative • Exclusive • Inclusive	• Direct/ Decisive • Wary/ Reluctant • Sense of Urgency • Shared Governance • Autocratic • Reactive • Deliberate • Unprepared vs. Prepared • Equipped vs. Blind/ Shooting from the Hip • Normal Operations vs. Crisis Operations
Duration of Crisis	• Acute • Prolonged	• Unknown Timeline • Crisis Length • Limited Crises to Compare
Breadth of Crisis	• Acute • Prolonged	• Unknown length • Many demands • Sustainability • Long-term Consequences
Initial institutional concerns	• Fears • Concerns • Worries • Surprises / Successes • College Community • Ability to Shift / Pivot • College's Response	• Safety • Peoples' Emotions/ Concerns/ • Perceptions • Barriers • Going Remote • Productivity • Access • Academic Success • Academic Readiness • Resilience • Costs • Means • Burnout / Fatigue • Health of Students and Employees • People working day and night to respond

INTERVIEW THEMES	RESPONSE CATEGORIES	KEY WORDS
Considerations	● Confounding Variables ● Competing Information ● Connection	● HLC vs. ICCB ● Keeping the Board Appraised ● New to Role ● Lack of Support ● Competing Sources of Info ● Connectivity to others (i.e., daughter in Seattle, Spain). ● Travel outside of US ● Travel within US
Planning	● Timeline ● Immediate ● Ongoing ● Future	● Early/ Urgent ● Ongoing Response ● Recovery Stage
Teams	● Advisory ● Working Groups	● External ● Internal ● Decision- Making ● Cabinet ● Leadership Teams ● Emergency Management Teams ● Faculty Senate ● Faculty Association ● Board of Trustees ● Task Force ● Temporary ● Permanent ● Short-Term ● Long-Term

Initial Concerns

All respondents shared the concern to support students and employees as a transition

to online course delivery and delivering online student services and business operations began.

President Rays:
Students really became a central focus. Because we were so scared about a lack of internet access, we're in such a rural area with a lot of hills and hollows, and the National Forest.

We had to make sure that those students were safe, and there was a lot of risk management that took place with facilities.

President Nature:
We found out that under 20% of the existing course shells in our LMS [Learning Management System] actually had content in them. They were all empty shells, so we had to go into real emergency mode. So, what we did was we took spring break and the following week, and we just shut down. We got the faculty learning how to populate their shells and also teaching some of them even how to go into the system. We had to be ready to make changes and figure out everything that we were going to do — including safety protocols.

President Rain:
We closed campus from March 16th through the 23rd. We said," look, we don't know what's happening. We're going to take a week." We wanted to have faculty spend as much time as they possibly could thinking about ways they could transition.

President Breeze:
We didn't have the luxury of processing this as much as we may have wanted to. I think that we've done a good job preparing, but it was time for decisive action.

Communication Strategies

All respondents shared their strategies of communication in a variety of delivery

methods.

President Rays:
We tried to redirect everybody to the web page. We had our big red box, our COVID box, as we called it, where we posted updates and announcements.

I also gave personal addresses just to explain where we were going so that it wasn't always just print. And the local presidents tried to communicate as a region as much as possible.

President Nature:
The message is always that the number one priority is the safety of employees and students. And consciously in that order. Because if these employees don't feel safe, then the students won't feel safe. So, we needed to do that.

President Rain:
We had an Emergency Management team meeting scheduled weekly. The Cabinet met weekly and then we started to do daily communication. We began to do a daily email message to all faculty and staff at the same time every day. I am very lucky in my board in their tremendous hands-off approach, and they trusted us.

The first thing we did was set up a COVID web page so we had a one destination point where everybody would go. We did some town hall pieces, so I think question and

answer pieces where people were able to ask questions ahead of time. As much as possible, try to give people an opportunity to interact and ask questions.

President Rain:
We had a daily employee email, but then we have a parallel student email.

President Eye:
We started troubleshooting the entire time in the vehicle on the way down [following a state-wide presidents' meeting] and started getting out in front of the press and making sure the press understood how we were going to communicate with our students and how we were going to communicate with the staff.

Between the press releases, social media, K alerts, and the student email accounts as well, we communicated as much as we could. I kind of gave an update on what we were doing as related to the institution regarding COVID, but also tried to always end on something positive, and always have the opportunity for questions and answers so that worked out well.

President Wind:
We first started by asking if we could handle everybody being online: What was our bandwidth demands and those kinds of things?

We tried to figure it out administratively first, then we asked the faculty if they were able to move everything online.

President Breeze:
I think it is in keeping with the type of culture we like to think we have that we try to be transparent and collegial. Share information. Then the college-wide virtual meetings became, you know, pretty standard practice for us to the point that we now do those twice a month. We would ask "how do we communicate this in a way that is consistent with our values?" We made the decision that we're going to be going with the science; we are going with the [information from the] Department of Health, because that's what we should do.

The Board was supportive all along, so I never felt like I needed to act in a way contrary to what I and others of the college thought because of political pressure put on me from the Board. We wanted to make sure people knew that they should not be in fear of their jobs.

President Cloud:
When the press releases went out, we would send them college wide so everybody would be included, but I would still expect everyone to talk to their team about what was going on and if there are issues to bring them back and forth.

I think that we probably had at least one communication once a week from me that focused on the news from the Emergency Planning group: "this is really what's going on." I then transitioned to the Cabinet, where we met and talked about our approaches.

President Hail:
We're very lucky that we have a very good Board of Trustees that doesn't micromanage. You know, I kept the Board apprised. I talked to the Chair often and the board was very supportive all along.

[On campus], the vice president would be communicating with the deans. The deans would be communicating with their faculty. A communication style pattern like that based on a hierarchy is never flawless, but I think it works well.

In the discussions, the presidents described a variety of strategies they employed to create a

crisis management team.

President Rays:
I've always been a big believer in servant leadership, and in Group decision making. In a nutshell, servant leadership is participatory management and I'm a big believer in consensus building as much as possible in decision making.

I tried as much as possible to take into consideration every possible perspective and not be guided by "well, this is how we do business" — because this wasn't normal.

President Eye:
We already had an Emergency Management plan in place, and we basically activated our incident command team. We created a daily action log specifically for COVID-19 that we broke down for the four divisions: Administrative, Student Services, Instructional, Executive Services, and those reports were funneled to me. I was just making sure that during this crisis the institution continued to serve its mission in whatever capacity we could.

President Wind:
I wanted to get a smaller circle around me to make it where we can talk about bigger picture stuff. Just being honest about what we knew, what we had, what or fund balance was just transparency. We were pretty autocratic; this was not a committee-work type thing where this is what we're going to do.

We had the ability to react and do those things and then pivot when we needed to pivot. I felt like meeting my team around me had that latitude as well. At the time everyone was busy. We knew there was too much at stake and this was too important to be overwhelmed. We just knew we had to do what we needed to do. Especially in the

1st 30 days, we were just reacting and going off on our own to do what we needed to do for our students. We reacted to the needs of our students.

President Cloud:
I put a team together, a Crisis Management Team, that met daily as we went through this process to make sure everything was done. But that was it. It was just like we are here, and we do have a Crisis Management Team here, but it had to be bigger. I had to make it bigger. When the press releases went out, we would send it college-wide so everybody would be distributed, but I would still expect everyone to talk to the team about what was going on and if there are issues to bring it back and forth.

As we were drafting the return-to-campus plan, there was a small team that put the structure together and began writing a plan to return to campus.

President Hail:
Our mission is so important that we have to be able to survive this and thrive in this because of the importance of the mission and the important role everybody has in it. We would ask "how do we communicate this in a way that is consistent with our values?" We made the decision that we're going to be going with the science; we are going with the [information from the] Department of Health, because that's what we should do.

Ongoing Response Planning

When asked about their ongoing college operations and planning for the future, several

presidents offered these insights.

President Rays:
We are reinventing strategic planning. We just really have to be even more data driven. We have to have sound environmental scanning like never before. We have always done environmental scanning before strategic planning, but it will be different in the future.

President Eye:
Our mindset right now Is to really look five to ten years down the road and imagine what education can look like.

President Hail:
We also made sure that we had resources available to people. For example, counseling resources. We made sure those were available and that people could access those confidentially because we didn't know necessarily how people were reacting to this.

We didn't have the luxury of processing as much as we may have wanted to, and again, I think that we've done a good job preparing, but it was time for decisive action.

In the interviews, every president talked about the importance of communication. This

communication was delivered in multiple formats, including websites, emails, virtual town hall

meetings, print and radio media. This communication was frequent and timely to keep

students, employees and community members up to date on changes in policy and practice. All

of the presidents shared they tried to be open and transparent in their communication, tried to

alleviate fears, along with helping the college focus on the future.

Each president also talked about the importance, early in the COVID-19 global

pandemic, of decisive action. As an example, all presidents extended spring break to allow

faculty and staff time to make necessary adjustments to moving classes and services online.

Then each president shared their plan to engage more people as the pandemic extended. Each

president had a different approach to the size and responsibility of the expanded group, but all

the groups were designed to create solutions and two-way communication. Presidents used

these groups to gather information while also sharing information.

In addition, each president shared their concern about the well being of the

organization. Examples of this concern included concerns about the health and safety of

students and employees, trying to eliminate fears and concerns, access to technology for

students and employees, especially in rural areas. Finally, all eight presidents stated the

importance of maintaining access to coursework and services, academic quality, and planning

for the future of the organization.

The shared experiences of the participants reflected the research of Fernandez and

Shaw (2020) who observed response themes from educational leaders in the U.S. These themes

include (1) Engaging in practical servant leadership focused on high levels of emotional

intelligence that empowers others through a collaborative lens; (2) Engaging in distributive

leadership strategies focused on a network of teams; and (3) Engaging in effective

communication patterns.

Gigliotti (2020) also outlines key competency areas related to crisis response. According

to Gigliotti's research of senior leaders in higher education, these competency areas are noted

as being valued, essential, and critical, and include (1) analytic evaluation of the crisis and

situation; (2) calming, empathetic, and compassionate leadership; (3) collaboration; (4) a focus

on the overall wellness of the institution; (5) effective communication strategies including

transparency and honesty; (6) trust; and (7) a demonstration of courage and persistence in

leading through the crisis.

RESEARCH QUESTION #4: RESULTS

The final research question focused on the pandemic's effect on the presidents'

personal leadership approaches and strategies: What factors affected the President's personal

leadership experience? Factors such as work-life balance, the emotional response to the crisis,

and the social response to the crisis were all noted as key sub-themes by the participants.

Categories or types of factors that emerged included stress response, positive and negative

emotional reactions, perceptions about the view of the college climate, as well as reactions to

the ways in which the crisis affected them personally as a leader and as an individual.

Table 6. Research Question #4: The Pandemic's Effects on the Presidents

INTERVIEW THEMES	RESPONSE CATEGORIES	KEY WORDS
Work-Life Balance	• Stressors • Coping Mechanisms • Supports • Resources	• Feeling Overwhelmed • Feeling Overloaded • Feeling Underprepared • Feeling Alone • Having more time than during normal operations • Family • Technologies • Leaning on Others • Isolation • Lack of Support • Extra Curriculars- Such as Gardening, Biking, Travel
Emotional Response	• Negative • Positive	• Frustration • Intolerance • Anxiety • Tempers • Pride • Worry
Social Response	• Perceptions of Trust • Perception of College Culture • Support from Others • Change in Leadership Style	• Workload • Work/Life Balance • Family • Perceptions of others • Positive Feedback • Negative Feedback • Worry about Productivity • Worry about Student Outcomes • Worry about the Health of College • Pride in College's Ability to Rally • More Assertive • More Direct • More Authoritative

Work-Life Balance

Three presidents spoke about the impact of the global pandemic on them as a person.

One president spoke about the pandemic induced isolation from family. Other presidents spoke

about being mindful of work/life balance along with recognizing college employees who were

assigned more tasks. Several respondents shared their beliefs of controlling their emotional

responses while recognizing the social implications around decisions they were making as

leaders of their community colleges. The following quotations illustrate this range of

experiences:

President Cloud:
I was disconnected from my family. I couldn't see my kids and grandkids.

President Hail:
Whatever stress level I had, I think it was probably less than some other folks. I learned that I needed to structure my time a lot better because I worked primarily from home. Change is impacting the way you're going to lead post COVID. I use technology much more.

[I was also very concerned about my family; I had] a lot of concern for my elderly parents; a lot of concern for our kids and grandkids in particular.

Three of the eight presidents noted some type of coping strategy they engaged with as a way to

balance the stressors associated with the ongoing duration of the crisis.

President Wind:
[I managed the stress by] shutting down. Having a work time, and then having some type of relief from that.

President Hail:
And a nice thing about this [the pandemic shutdown] was for me as a cyclist. I found that I had much more time to ride my bike.

President Rain:
Some coping mechanisms I really began to do as much as possible for my personal health and welfare. I slept as much as I could. I avoided drinking as much as I could, and I exercised as much as I could. Luckily, we had a very nice spring. I did a ton of gardening. I built a stone patio — I did a lot of outside physical work, and those activities were really good.

Emotional Response

In addition to discussing their coping mechanisms, the presidents acknowledged their

initial emotional responses to the shifts caused by the pandemic.

President Cloud:
I was getting irritated because it was all about crisis management not one-on-one discussions. People don't realize what it's like to sit in the president's office: I'm in the middle of a pandemic, and I said nobody really appreciates all that I was going through.

President Rain:
I became very careful about drama, over dramatizing or exaggerating or being very careful about not allowing my personal emotions to play into the pieces. I try to keep calm, try to be cool, even if I just feel personally really struggling with lots of things. I'm aware that all kinds of bad things are happening.

President Rays:
The unknown was probably the biggest anxiety creator for me. It [people in the community dying from COVID] made it less foreign to me, and it made it much more personal and in your face. It just really made it more personal and that much more insidious.

President Eye:
I would say it was definitely increased stress.

President Hail:
[I had] a lot of anger about how we as a culture are so polarized and how that polarization, I think, has led to the deaths of thousands and 100,000 people who should not have died. [I have] a lot of empathy for lots of folks out there.

I'm actually an introvert, so in many ways this is a lot easier for me than for my wife who is an extrovert.

President Wind:
I didn't lose my temper. I just had a short fuse. I had a lack of tolerance for people not getting their job done right. Yeah, I'm working really hard to get my job done.

Social Response

In contrast to their personal emotional responses, they also commented on the more

public-facing social responses to the pandemic.

President Cloud:
I think we were all in survival mode.

President Rain:
I became very careful not to over-promise and became very careful not to say things I'd have to take back.

President Rays:
So, while some things can be wrapped up very neatly, this one's not going to be able to wrap up as neatly as some of the other events, and that's been the hardest lesson because people want a fixed reality. But it amazed me that people really came together in the crisis event. I think for me, and growing up as a leader, you [know that you] can't make everyone happy. We really can't be all things to all people.

President Breeze:
We were having to make decisions. I mean you make a lot of decisions as a president. I'm absolutely not the same kind of leader I was in 2016. I've always been a very collaborative leader. I'm data-based: present the data, present the need for change to do it better and to do it differently, and then let's move forward. Now I'm a lot more comfortable saying "you don't like it? OK, we're still doing it anyway. I'm never going to make you happy, so we're just going to move forward. I've gathered enough information and we're moving forward." I'm going keep the grit; I'm going to keep the assertiveness.

President Eye:
I try to remember that everybody is going through a lot of stress right now is really really what we're trying to do. You know you take care of your employees, and they are going to take care of their work.

President Hail:
To this day I'm remarkably pleased with how smoothly things went. And I think that happened because of the culture of the institution — which we can't take for granted. I think that happens because of having really good, competent people in place who share cultural values.

President Nature:
I really believe in collegial shared governance, and [the pandemic's] not going to change my belief in shared governance and collegiality.

The most effective thing you could do is to be nimble, and we need to be. We need to be ready to make things change right away when necessary and be attuned to what the hearts and minds of people, particularly employees but also our students.

President Wind:
I still want to hold onto the authentic piece, being transparent, building collaborations and partnerships. My job is to bring you bad news. My job is to bring you good news. If

that's what the news was, then that's what the news is. That [transparency] takes a president further with people. When presidents start worrying about how they keep their job, that's a good way to lose it.

When the COVID-19 global pandemic started and continued, several of the presidents in this study noted the impact that extra workload had on them as an individual. Bell (2019) found that leaders deal with volatile and complex crises at multiple levels that require immediate attention and information for decision-making and a strategic approach. Many of these presidents spoke about extensive time away from family, their extreme focus on work, and the strategies they implemented for themselves to relieve this additional stress.

The study participants recognized the importance of acknowledging the emotional needs of students, employees, and themselves. The presidents provided examples of trying to educate, listen, and respond to individuals to reduce the emotional response to the fear of the unknown caused by the ongoing pandemic. The presidents also shared the importance of meeting safety requirements to bring students and employees back to campus.

In addition to these insights into themselves and their institutions, the presidents shared the impact of COVID on their leadership style and approach — acknowledging some of the areas of the college that will not change, including shared governance — but noting that they have changed as a leader with some taking on a more decisive approach as leaders. The presidents' responses also acknowledged their awareness of the significant role their college plays in their local, rural community and how their communities looked to the college for solutions, guidance, and leadership.

CHAPTER CONCLUSION

Chapter Four provided an overview of the study participants and presented the study findings. Following conversations with eight rural Illinois community college presidents, an analysis of the interview data provided insight into how these leaders experienced decision-making related to the COVID-19 pandemic and the ways the pandemic personally affected them as leaders. The responses to the four research questions focused on the training and prior experiences that impacted decisions, the resources the participants utilized to inform decisions, the initial actions the presidents took when faced by the crisis, and the factors that impacted the president's experiences while leading their institution through the pandemic.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND FUTURE RESEARCH

INTRODUCTION

This final chapter offers recommendations for future leaders related to responding to a

crisis and leading through a crisis. The chapter begins with a restatement of the aim of the

study and then provides a summary of the study's findings. Next, the chapter presents

proposed recommendations, discusses implications of those recommendations, and shares

future research possibilities.

The descriptive study centered on the lived experiences of eight Illinois community

college presidents' and their leadership responses during the first year of COVID-19. The

participants were presidents from rural community colleges within the State of Illinois, selected

from the Illinois Community College Board peer groups I and II. They were selected using

purposive sampling. The study was conducted using a qualitative research method. Data were

collected via guided in-depth interviews utilizing Zoom platform technology; and the data were

then analyzed for broad themes.

By exploring the experiences of leaders who made decisions while guiding their rural

Illinois Community College during the pandemic, we can learn more about the decision

approaches used, critical issues faced, and actions taken to better prepare rural leaders for

planning during future crises. The aim of this dissertation was to develop a set of

recommendations for crisis response. The significance of this study is that it adds to the

understanding of factors associated with how college leaders make decisions during a crisis, with an emphasis on rural institutions. Even if colleges are spared from responding to another pandemic, colleges are unlikely to escape future crisis situations. Understanding the essence of the leaders' experiences offers leaders insight into how to prepare for, and lead, through crisis situations that may arise in the future.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The findings of the study were summarized according to the statement of problem outlined in Chapter One. The research examined the ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic impacted a leader's response, both as a leader and as an individual. To answer this problem, four research questions were developed to guide the data collection process, and to address the statement of the problem.

1. How does crisis management training and/or experience affect a community college president's practices in an actual crisis?

2. What resources and support systems prove to be valuable and essential for a community college president when facing a crisis?

3. What initial actions, decisions, and behaviors drive a community college president when first faced with a crisis?

4. What factors affected the president's personal leadership experience?

Data from the semi-structured interviews with eight rural Illinois community college presidents were reviewed and analyzed for themes and meaning. The interview questions were designed to provide evidence for the previously listed research questions. The data revealed five guiding themes:

- During the COVID-19 pandemic, presidents applied prior experiences and used information from formal training to develop their initial response.

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- The complexity of the COVID-19 pandemic prompted presidents to utilize multiple resources and supports to inform decisions.

- The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of effective and ongoing communication throughout the duration of the crisis response.

- The COVID-19 pandemic challenged the president's leadership style and informed the ways leaders led their institution's crisis response.

- During the COVID-19 pandemic, presidents engaged in various types, and degrees, of work-life balance strategies to manage personal stress.

FINDING #1: PRIOR EXPERIENCES AND TRAINING

During the COVID-19 pandemic, presidents applied prior experiences and used information from formal training to develop their initial response.

In examining the data, four participants reported applying strategies that had stemmed from prior experience, or informal training, during the initial response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Responses from the participants elicited the understanding that while prior crisis training in some capacity is beneficial for all leaders, whether that be in the way of formalized training or simply personal prior experience, no amount of crisis training fully prepares a leader for the elements of intuition and gut leadership necessary to navigate the multi-faceted challenges of a crisis, in this case the COVID-19 pandemic.

Participants reported that previous experiences helped some of the presidents decide which key personnel to pull together in order to develop an initial response. Other presidents shared that prior training derived from the Federal Emergency Management Agency or Homeland Security helped them begin their analysis of the situation and develop a plan of action. President Rays from College C noted the benefits of a strong institutional culture around crisis response leading up to the pandemic. President Rays stated, "we really embrace

emergency management; we really embrace that at College C and the Fire Science Academy

and [relied on] the National Incident Management System (NIMS) training."

Moreover, each president shared that a perfect plan did not exist for responding to the

pandemic. Culture and organizational structure of the institution, along with familiarity of prior

training, were both significant to the ways in which presidents shaped their response. President

Wind summarized it best, "It [the crisis] is just problem solving and I think it's still an estimation

of what you're really facing and finding a way to address it." Overall, the data gathered from

presidents in this study suggest that having prior experience with crisis response is helpful to

leaders when approaching a crisis response situation.

FINDING #2: RESOURCES AND SUPPORTS

The complexity of the COVID-19 pandemic prompted presidents to utilize multiple resources and supports to inform decisions.

A consistent finding from the lived experiences of the participants was the value of

having a variety of resources available to inform the decision-making process. Presidents spoke

of utilizing internal and external sources of information during the ongoing response process.

The internal resources reported included feedback from team leaders operating from within

the organization, along with input from members of the college board of trustees. The external

resources noted included local and national news sources, federal and state government

guidance, and idea-sharing from other community college presidents. Based on the finding, a

mixture of these resources was utilized by presidents throughout the response process to

inform decisions as the pandemic continued to evolve. As an example, President Eye shared:

> [Executive Director of Illinois Community College Board (ICCB)] did a pretty good job of
> communicating with us weekly. ICCB and our peers on what other people are doing

definitely helped stuff and tweaked it to the rural community. So I mean, that was definitely a strong resource for us as well.

An implication for future leaders to consider is that the research suggests there is value in engaging as many resources as possible, and that accessing a diverse range of resources provides presidents with multiple perspectives from which to shape their response.

FINDING #3: IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNICATION

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of effective and ongoing communication throughout the duration of the crisis response.

One of the outcomes of the COVID-19 pandemic significant to the research was the increase in the amount of communication and the variety of communication methods determined necessary that were utilized to share important and ongoing information. During the initial stages of the pandemic, presidents shared that their communication style often differed from their normal communication pattern by becoming more direct. Each president handled the inflow and outflow of communication in a slightly different manner, but each president noted an approach that was rooted in transparency. A variety of technology tools, and a diversified approach to communication strategies, were deployed to inform stakeholders and disseminate information. Some presidents also commented on their approach to tracking physical resources along with keeping a log of decisions that were developed for documentation purposes and future reference. President Nature stressed the importance of the message's focus as being central, regardless of the type of communication methods that were most utilized and aligned with a president's leadership style:

> The message is always that the number one priority is the safety of employees and students, consciously in that order, because if these employees don't feel safe, then the students won't feel safe. So, we needed to do that.

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In essence, effective communication proved to be a valuable leadership competency as noted by each of the presidents interviewed. The participants expressed communication as critical to issues related to safety, operations, and the overall climate of the institution. The findings suggest that during crisis response, leaders are faced with an even greater demand to effectively communicate, at times to an increased extent, and often in a divergent style of leadership than they demonstrate during normal operations.

FINDING #4: EFFECT ON LEADERSHIP STYLE

The COVID-19 pandemic challenged the president's leadership style and informed the ways leaders led their institution's crisis response.

Analysis of interview data showed that participants found the pandemic influenced their leadership, at times in divergent ways from their preferred leadership style during non-crisis periods of operation. Participants described their experience of crisis response leadership as being characterized by uncertainty, a focus on the well-being of the campus, the importance of the role of communication, and as a context in which decisions were accepted as temporary. Participants also described that they needed to be aware of how they allocated their time to pandemic-related issues, by consciously setting aside time with their senior staff to plan for the ongoing sustainability of the college. A final component of this theme was the ways in which the participants described taking on a more directive style of leadership in planning activities during the COVID-19 pandemic. President Breeze shared:

> We were having to make decisions. I mean you make a lot of decisions as a president. I'm absolutely not the same kind of leader I was in 2016. I've always been a very collaborative leader. I'm data-based, present the data, present the need for change and to do it better and to do it differently and let's move forward. I'm a lot more comfortable saying you don't like it? OK, we're still doing it anyway. I'm never gonna make you happy, so we're just gonna move forward. I've gathered enough information and we're moving forward. I'm gonna keep the grit; I'm going to keep the assertiveness.

Because crisis situations inherently place demand on a leader across many facets, the

ways in which the presidents were challenged to lead were directly influenced by the urgency

and complexity of the demands the institution faced. Participants communicated the nature

and scope of the pandemic as placing extensive burden on the institution as a whole. Thus,

future leaders will want to be able to recognize when varying styles of leadership, and the ways

in which they leverage those styles, are most suitable to the varying demands of a wide range

of circumstances.

FINDING #5: WORK-LIFE BALANCE STRATEGIES

During the COVID-19 pandemic, presidents engaged in various types, and degrees, of work-life balance strategies to manage personal stress.

Participants reported that they found different ways to balance their experience

throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. The principal work-life balance strategies noted included

prayer, meditation, reading, conversations with trusted individuals, or self-care activities such

as exercise and vacation. Participants described strategies utilized to engage with college

employees that included reflective prompts such as "what's working, what's not, and what can

we do differently," as well as, checking in on the workloads and mental health of college

employees. President Rain mentioned several wellness activities that served to combat

individual or personal stress during the crisis. He noted,

> Some coping mechanisms I really began to do as much as possible, this is for personal
> health and welfare, were that I slept as much as I could. I avoided drinking as much as I
> could, and I exercised as much as I could. Luckily, we had a very nice spring. I do a ton of
> gardening. I built a stone patio. I mean, I did a lot of outside physical work and those
> were really good activities.

The findings reveal that presidents who engaged in positive coping strategies reported

feeling reduced stress and an increased ability to perceive higher persistence throughout the

duration of the crisis. The researchers heard an array of coping and response strategies used

that the presidents spoke about openly during the interview process. A significant implication

noted from the findings is that presidents who utilized coping strategies intended to aid their

response, both as a leader and as an individual, communicated an increased positive perception

about their ability to navigate the prolonged crisis period successfully; whereas, presidents who

noted either a lack of healthy coping strategies or a gravitation to strategies that did not serve

as helpful to their transition, noted lowered and more negative perceptions about their overall

leadership and individual transition over the course of the crisis.

FINDING #6: CHALLENGES FOR RURAL COLLEGES

The COVID-19 pandemic created some unique challenges for the response in rural areas.

The distinction of the participants leading a rural community college was important to

this research. The researchers were curious to discover if there were any barriers or

deficiencies significant to leadership at rural community colleges. The participants shared their

observations of a lack of internet connectivity early in the pandemic and the need to develop

solutions to provide internet support to students and employees who did not have reliable,

high speed, internet connections. The presidents also shared the need to disseminate laptops

to students who did not already own a laptop in order to help students complete their spring

2020 course work, since the pandemic disrupted the last eight weeks of that spring semester.

Outside of technology challenges, participants shared the challenge of working with

multiple county health departments who were part of the community college service area. Each

participant shared that they received inconsistent guidance early in the pandemic from the

variety of county health departments that serve their community college district.

Finally, in the early stages of the pandemic, the federal government started to share Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act funding to America's colleges and universities. However, the first distribution was based on a Full Time Equivalency (FTE) enrollment figures for colleges. FTE is calculated by the total credit hours generated at a college and divided by 15. This calculation was a financial disadvantage to community colleges, especially rural community colleges, because of the large number of part-time students who attend community colleges and also generate fewer credit hours. The services that were needed by students were not based on credit hours, but by headcounts. During the pandemic, the student taking one course needed the same academic and technical support to complete the semester, as a student taking five courses. The findings suggest that specific challenges did emerge for college leaders at rural serving institutions that proved to be potential threats to the overall health of college operations, according to the presidents interviewed. All the presidents reported some level of challenge uniquely associated with their college's rural status.

IMPLICATIONS

Sitting and future presidents leading at colleges designated as rural should anticipate financial constraints, access to reliable Wi-Fi and technology, and communication challenges as key issues as they prepare for future crisis situations. Therefore, the data suggests that presidents should predict potential barriers, and implementation challenges, while preparing for future crisis situations when they assess their college's emergency management or crisis response plans during non-crisis periods.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The goal of this research is that by carefully examining and developing an in-depth understanding of what a few rural community college leaders experienced, that themes will emerge in order to drive future research about the COVID-19 crisis response and identify competencies that can be utilized by other rural community college presidents when navigating a prolonged crisis.

RECOMMENDATION 1. PLAN FOR CRISIS

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the National Incident Management System (NIMS) from the Emergency Management Agency were two of the most frequently identified crisis trainings mentioned during this research. These trainings provide resources that assist in planning and executing response plans during a crisis. The training also includes a segment on public relations and addressing media inquiries. Part of preparing for a crisis is to develop relationships with organizations who could be utilized during a crisis. Some examples that were identified in this research included local emergency management agencies (law enforcement and fire), health providers (hospitals or county health departments), social service agencies, and peers who are respected and trusted to provide analytical feedback. Prior to a crisis occurring, it is important for a leader to have a solid understanding of the resources that could be needed in a crisis. A leader must understand fiscal resources in order to allocate funds as needed during the crisis. This understanding includes cash on hand and the ability to purchase needed equipment or materials without using the purchase order process. As a leader, knowing employees' skills and talents can be helpful during the response to a crisis. For example, knowing the employees who have healthcare training can be helpful in providing

insight and advice in health-related decisions. Another example includes knowing employees

who have a strong technology background who could be deployed to assist the technology help

desk while information technology employees work on more complex issues. Next, leaders

should be aware of physical resources, including spaces inside of buildings, technology

resources, the back-up plan for computer-connected services, cleaning options, and security

protocols.

Successful leaders have the ability to devote the appropriate short-term resources to

urgent needs while maintaining a focus on long-term strategic goals. They do not hesitate to

make the hard choices (for example, work from home, social distancing, hiring freeze, canceling

in-person meetings, or even a total lockdown) to address short-term priorities. Successful

leaders also demonstrate the courage and foresight to preserve investments that are essential

to the long-term health of the organization. In the face of uncertainty, some leaders are guided

primarily by concerns over the optics of their decisions; strong leaders are guided by a view of

the sacrifices required to keep the organization functioning. Successful leaders cut through the

clutter of conflicting data and opinions, identify the areas that need attention, and allocate the

resources accordingly.

RECOMMENDATION 2. FOCUS ON CLEAR, CONSISTENT, CONTROLLED, COMMUNICATION TO HELP OTHERS MAKE
SENSE OF THE SITUATION

During any crisis, one role of a leader is to quickly develop and communicate a vision

and path forward, providing a sense of direction to the organization. During the COVID-19

pandemic, it was important for a leader to develop a communication approach that

incorporated multiple formats in order to spread the message to as many stakeholders as

possible. The message needed to be accurate, consistent, and informative to help all of the

stakeholders make sense of what was happening, and to communicate why decisions were

being made. Many of the participants shared their belief in the importance of the

communication being frequent, being delivered at a consistent time (such as, 2 pm each day),

being transparent by admitting if some information was unknown (such as, not knowing how

long a shelter-in-place rule would be occurring), being empathetic by sharing personal

challenges or stating the understanding of challenges stakeholders were facing.

RECOMMENDATION 3. DEVELOP AWARENESS OF THE VARIETY OF LEADERSHIP STYLES TO UTILIZE IN VARIOUS
SCENARIOS

This research highlighted the importance of a leader to be able to deploy the

appropriate leadership style appropriate to the presenting scenarios. The research highlighted

the need for leaders to be transformational during certain times and transactional in other

scenarios. The times when transformational leadership was utilized included leaders who led

with empathy and considered the needs of employees, students and community members.

When leaders were utilizing transformational leadership strategies, they were looking for win-

win opportunities while building confidence in the organization. During the COVID-19

pandemic, there were times that leaders were forced to be more transactional in their decision

making in order to protect employees and the organization or to remain efficient. Some

decisions were forced by state or federal government decisions, including stay-at-home orders

and restrictions on who was deemed an essential employee. This research reinforced that,

during a crisis, some transactional decisions must be made in order to protect stakeholders and

the college.

This research also emphasized that the preferred leadership style of the participants was to be a transformational leader who led with empathy, focused on service to others, and engaged in an adaptive leadership style in order to focus on the well-being of students and employees. Participants developed win-win scenarios by being inclusive and strategic; and led with the future in mind.

RECOMMENDATION 4. UNDERSTAND EMOTIONS AND POLITICS OF A CRISIS

When people are not sure how they should behave, they look to leaders as role models. Effective leaders behave consistently with what they are asking of others. During the pandemic, it proved important for leaders to be the first to embrace new policies, such as cutting back on travel, and practicing new behaviors, such as social distancing. The data suggest that people are more likely to follow the example of leaders whom they respect. The pandemic spotlighted the fact that responsible leadership during a crisis requires sustained engagement with evidence to support ongoing growth and adaptation.

The research suggests that leaders should ensure that policy and practice in their organizations and communities are informed by the best available evidence. Additionally, leaders should commit to systematically consider evidence from a variety of sources and evaluate it against consistent and objective criteria. An evidence-based approach prevents a political model of evidence utilization, where selective evidence is brought into play to defend predetermined positions. Responsible leaders engage in skilled and sustained efforts to distinguish fact from fiction and seek verifiable data from non-biased sources. Evidence suggests that effective leaders bring together communities to engage in complex sense-making, and to contribute to the rebuilding phase post-pandemic.

People look to leaders to be calm and deliberate in their decisions and actions. Leaders who react to stressful events in highly emotional ways may add to people's stress and anxiety. Leaders can start by slowing down, taking stock of their stress, and by understanding factors that contribute to an emotional response. Even when facing the demands of a high-profile crisis, it is recommended that leaders take breaks to reset and refocus. Leaders communicated feeling immense pressure, fatigue, and stress during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Unresolved stress results in burnout, contributing to inefficiency. As noted from the research, when individuals experience burnout, they risk becoming detached and ineffective. Presidents can be careful to pay attention to early signs of stress, emotional exhaustion, and burnout, while simultaneously planning interventions that support the well-being of themselves and their employees. Encouraging and modeling self-care interventions, such as mindfulness and other psychological wellness strategies, proved paramount to the health and transition of the presidents interviewed in this study. However, this requires commitment, support, and investment on the part of presidents, as well as buy-in from teams. Based on what was communicated by presidents during the interviews, fostering a culture around employee wellness and the encouragement to openly express their concerns in a non-judgmental environment promoted trust and healthy coping behaviors in others.

The data suggest that it is important for presidents to find a way to relieve personal stress, especially in the context of the extended duration of this pandemic. Examples of participants practicing self-care included bike riding, gardening, reading, yoga, and other mindfulness activities. The importance of developing these self-care techniques is to continue

persisting in the face of highly pressurized environments, and to "bounce back" from the

devastation of COVID-19, with a focus on recharging for the purpose of sustaining throughout

the duration of the crisis.

RESEARCHERS' REFLECTIONS

The researchers wish to acknowledge and mention that their current positions, titles,

and professional roles have undoubtedly had direct and indirect impact on their roles as

researchers in this study. Because both researchers hold current positions as academic leaders

within the state of Illinois and are classified as part of the ICCB peer groups of focus in this

study, they recognize that these roles have potentially added value and limitation to the overall

credibility of the study.

Shelley Barkley serves as the Dean of General Education and Transfer programs for Sauk

Valley Community College. Sauk Valley Community College is a rural Illinois college within Peer

Group II of the researchers' sample focus groups. The following self-disclosure is provided by

Shelley and is a noteworthy mention to her role as a co-researcher of the study.

> As an administrator at an institution within the same state and focus group as the
> participants sampled in the research study, I recognize that my professional identity
> lends itself in a significant way to the data collection process. On one hand, it stands
> appropriate to argue that Curt and I had greater access to the research participants
> simply because of their familiarity with us professionally. It also stands to reason that as
> researchers we have a greater understanding and empathy for the complex leadership
> issues that the participants faced throughout their response to the crisis. However,
> unlike Curt's experience as a president in his role, I worked in a role that serves to
> support the Office of the President at the college that serve. Being in a role that did not
> serve on the president's executive team, provided me with the ability to listen to the
> participants' responses from the perspective of a support role, as opposed to a lead
> decision-making role throughout the process.

Curt Oldfield serves as the President of Spoon River College. Spoon River College is a

rural Illinois college within Peer Group I of the researchers' sample focus groups. The following

self-disclosure is provided by Curt and is a noteworthy mention as it relates to his role as a co-

researcher of the study.

> During the year of 2019-2020, along with serving as the President of Spoon River
> College, I also served as the President of the Illinois Council of Community College
> Presidents (ICCCP). That year of service allowed me to work with all of the Illinois
> Community College presidents and this office further connected me to my peers of
> fellow presidents across the State of Illinois.
>
> As a researcher, I recognize that there was a possibility that the participants' responses
> may not have been as open or authentic as they may have otherwise been had I not
> been a colleague and peer to the presidents sampled in the study, nor if I had not been
> functioning in a similar role at the time of the data collection process. On the other
> hand, because I was functioning in a similar role, it is possible that the participants may
> have felt more comfort and familiarity with me as the researcher, which may have
> contributed to their ability to respond with more authenticity and transparency, further
> enriching the data collection process.
>
> Additionally, because I serve as a president at a rural institution, similar to the types of
> institutions presidents sampled led, I feel that I was afforded a deeper understanding of
> the context that the participants were experiencing at the time of the pandemic.

RESEARCHERS' ROLES

When we decided to work together and co-author this dissertation research, we wanted

to capture the lived experiences of presidents in rural Illinois who led their institutions through

the pandemic. We wanted this research to inform future leaders about crisis leadership during

a prolonged pandemic. Throughout the process of completing this research, we each shared

equal responsibility in every stage.

As co-researchers we were committed to assisting one another with the design process,

data collection, analysis and interpretation of the data, production of the dissertation, and

delivering of the final product. Curt's strengths throughout this process were his ability to

anticipate and prepare next steps, with a mindfulness on efficiency; while Shelley's strengths

included recording keeping, idea generating and organization of information, and a strong understanding of social science research.

The benefits of co-research included a team approach to writing and asking questions during the participant interviews. This interview approach helped to potentially reduce participant bias. Also, the researchers took responsibility for writing analysis from interviews related to certain research questions. The opposite researcher then objectively reviewed the analysis and challenged any inconsistencies. These strategies were recommended by our committee chair, to reduce researcher bias.

The challenges that emerged during the co-research process were primarily logistical. As colleagues we worked extremely well together and functioned in a manner that really played to each other's strengths. However, there is no doubt that a co-authored dissertation process comes with greater communication needs and challenges, increased time dedicated to the element of collaboration, and a necessary demand for give and take across all decisions that need to be made.

During the interviews with participants, as researchers we were listening for the range of experiences that the participants endured while leading during the pandemic. We wanted to hear how they first responded to the pandemic, what priorities guided their decisions, and what strategies they utilized to accomplish their college mission. We were also curious about how they kept their college moving forward as the pandemic lingered.

LIMITATIONS, DELIMITATIONS, AND FUTURE RESEARCH

LIMITATIONS

In addition to the aforementioned cultural biases noted by the researchers, several other limitations were identified as shortcomings during the process of conducting this research. As factors almost entirely outside of the researcher's control, the limitations impacted multiple areas of the research process including sample size of the participants, access to respondents including interview modality and restrictions, narrowed research across the literature on this type of crisis scenario, and the participants' ability to reliably respond to the interview questions.

The sample size of the study served as both a limitation and a delimitation of the research. The sample size, while stemming from a purposive sampling process whereby setting it up as a delimiting variable to the research, was also narrowed by the limitation of participant response rate. Of the two community college peer groups sampled within the State of Illinois, a total of eleven participants existed as a potential sample population. However, two presidents either did not elect to participate in the research or had transitioned to another state for employment and were not able to be reached for participation. The other potential respondent was naturally eliminated due to his role as a co-researcher of this study.

Another factor significant to the research relates to the limitation of access to the respondents during the data collection process. The in-depth interviews needed to be conducted utilizing synchronous Zoom technology, in part because of the need for continued reduced social contact still carried forward by the restrictions from the pandemic. While Zoom technology increased access to reach the participants, it limited the research process by

eliminating the natural social setting of conducting the interviews in-person. As a result, the ways in which the researchers were able to interact and engage with the participants were restricted.

A third limitation of the study existed as a result of a limited body of research across the literature on leadership during a pandemic. An extensive body of research exists to support leadership during a crisis, but very little existed in the way of research related to response during a pandemic, and even less existed about higher education and response to a major health crisis. The decision to focus on this topic was not only timely and salient to the researchers, but also critical for other leaders in the field. As leaders continue to face crisis situations as part of their roles, future research on this topic will help to further prepare the next generation of leaders to be more effective when faced with other situations of like nature.

Finally, a limitation of noteworthy mention relates to the participants' ability to serve as reliable conduits of information in a reflective nature during the interview process. Because the data collection of this study occurred after the period of time by which the statement of the problem is framed and focused, it is important to recognize the potential weak spots that may have existed in the participants' responses.

Further, based on what the research notes about self-reported data being inherently flawed by factors such as selective memory (focusing on some information in the self-reporting process to the exclusion of others); telescoping of information (recalling events according to one timeframe when they may have occurred within another time frame); attribution (attributing either positive or negative associations to events based on the respondent's locus of control to the events, often in the form of positively attributing things that are perceived as

good to one's own agency, while attributing things perceived as negative to external agencies); and last exaggeration (embellishing the context or nature of events and / or responses to the events).

The delimitations of the research are boundaries set by the researchers intended to limit the scope and narrow the focus of the study. Several delimitations were set by the researchers in this study as a way to focus the data collection on areas relevant and salient to the researchers' own experiences as leaders.

Because the researchers were heavily interested on gathering data about crisis response for rural community college leaders from colleges similar in nature to the ones from which they both reside and work, and because the researchers were intent on designing a qualitative research methodology utilizing in-depth interviews as the primary data collection method, there was an intentional effort to seek out information from participants serving as president at rural institutions from the State of Illinois. Thus, the decision was made to focus the study on participants with similar backgrounds and from the same geographic regions as the researchers. The benefit to this type of intentional narrowing of the sample was that it enabled the researchers to feel an investment in the nature of the research solicited by the study.

Other delimitations not associated with the researchers' areas of interest included gaps in the literature or areas of research not relevant to the statement of the problem that limited the breadth of understanding of this study, the gender of the participants, time as a parameter, as well as other methodologies intentionally not incorporated into the data collection process.

The significant gap in the literature that proved to be a critical element influencing this research was a lack of research on the general topic of pandemics and other global health crises impacting higher education. Fortunately, more research emerged in parallel to this study being conducted, so the researchers were able to pull from other sources of information throughout the research process; however, the gap in the research is something that was of value to the researchers in their decision to focus their attention on the COVID-19 pandemic response for higher education leaders. The researchers were intrigued by the thought of contributing to the larger body of knowledge centered on the pandemic response for leaders at rural-serving institutions.

It was a conscious decision by the researchers not to focus heavily on gender and length of service as variables in the data collection and analysis processes. The researchers do recognize that some of the participants' responses, and thus the findings, may be influenced by or differ in conclusion by gender and years of service, but because of the already small sample size of the study, the researchers decided not to focus on these variables in the analysis.

Time was also a delimitation of this study. Because the COVID-1 coronavirus pandemic lingered as a crisis situation for leaders over a prolonged period of time — and in some ways leaders are still responding to the effects of the crisis — it was decided by the researchers to focus the data collection process around the timeframe of the first year of response for the participants. However, even as the findings of this study are being reported, the varying demands brought forth by the pandemic continue to impact leaders who are still experiencing the spillover effects to their leadership from the extended duration of the crisis response. The decision to limit the time frame of focus for this study was primarily due to the researchers'

wanting to report on leadership competencies most closely associated with the earliest stages of the pandemic response.

Further, the methodology of the research was intentional in design. The researchers wished to conduct a truly qualitative and organic research study by collecting data via an in-depth interview process. As such, the researchers decided not to design a mixed-method study by incorporating other data collection instruments such as a survey or a questionnaire. Instead, the researchers planned for a thematic analysis of the respondents' narratives about their lived experiences in leading during the pandemic. Because the researchers intended to capture and collect data centered around a relatively untouched research topic across the literature, they made the decision not to overly structure the nature of the data collection process, and thus not to influence the participants' responses and perspectives based on a predetermined or overly structured data collection method.

Last, a delimitation of the study was the decision by the researchers to exclude Curt as a participant within the research process. Because Curt served in a role in which there may have been a perceived amount of undue bias or influence over the findings of the study, it was decided that he not serve as a participant in the study, despite the fact that he qualified to participate as outlined by the criteria set for by the purposive sampling method constructed by the researchers.

In hindsight, given the limited size of the data collection sample, and given his own personal experience as a president within the parameters of the study, it may have proved valuable for him to have participated in his own research study. The fact that this was a co-authored research process, to which another researcher could have filled the role of

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interviewer, and the fact that he possesses valuable insight on the very topic of interest to this study, may have contributed added value to the research had he been targeted to enroll as a researcher in his own study. However, in the end, the researchers decided that the potential risks or costs to the research process outweighed the potential benefits to him participating in the study as a respondent.

FUTURE RESEARCH

The lack of research about the lived experiences of college leaders who were leading a community college during the COVID-19 pandemic creates a challenge in understanding how leaders might better prepare for future crisis events and position their institutions to thrive. This study contributed to filling that gap in research. While this study revealed important findings, it also revealed valuable future research opportunities.

A further study to examine the ongoing impact of the pandemic on leader decision-making could give rise to additional findings and strategies related to leading through an extended crisis to assess if this prolonged crisis has led to leader fatigue or burnout.

A larger geographical, quantitative analysis of leadership competencies utilized during the pandemic could inform future higher education doctoral programs' curriculum and related national association guidelines.

An additional research opportunity is related to the federal and state funds that many community colleges received during the pandemic. How those COVID resources were allocated carries important insight into how colleges bounced back from pandemic-related setbacks.

A study could be conducted to determine if the pandemic has changed the political landscape of higher education for leaders in crisis, or how the political landscape impacts leaders' decisions in higher education during a crisis.

The scope of and nature of the future populations could be sampled and researched for significance across other demographic, geographic, or types of institutions. In this study, the researchers aimed at gathering a deeper understanding of the issues faced by rural presidents leading relatively small institutions. Future studies could examine the perspectives of presidents from suburban, urban, and / or larger institutions within the State of Illinois. Additionally, future studies could replicate the essence of this study and analyze data from presidents who hold leadership positions at institutions outside of the state of Illinois, or from institutions governed by larger state or system run institutions.

Finally, a longitudinal study of the pathways to the presidency that includes background information about the participants and their lived experiences.

SUMMARY

This research examined the leadership roles of rural Illinois community college presidents during the COVID-19 pandemic. The research draws conclusions about the actions, decisions, and leadership response as demonstrated by eight community college presidents from rural serving institutions, categorized by the ICCB as Peer Groupings I and II.

Findings from the research conclude that prior experience and training, access to a variety of resources and supports, effective and ongoing communication, a varied approach to one's leadership style, and a commitment to a strong work-life balance are all factors that

emerged as themes of significance for presidents when responding to the prolonged situation of the crisis.

Elements pertinent to leaders of rural institutions were also identified. Presidents from rural institutions reported technology deserts that existed unique to the rural and geographic location of their institutions. Access to reliable Wi-Fi and digital technology devices necessary to the successful engagement of remote instruction proved a challenge for nearly all the presidents interviewed. Other themes related to the rural component of this study centered on the disparity and / or diversity in the funding and financial supports available to rural institutions, along with the variance in the guidance that was provided to presidents from other governing bodies or agencies across their districts, and statewide.

Overall, this descriptive qualitative study seeks to support both sitting and future presidents by broadening their understanding about crisis response relevant to the role of a rural community college president. It is through the lived experiences of the participants sampled that the researchers hope to not only expand the larger body of knowledge on crisis leadership for community college presidents and to highlight the issues they face, but to also prepare future leaders for prolonged crisis response situations.

The research indicates that college presidents need preparation in the areas of positioning leadership support teams critical to their decision-making; strategies for effective and ongoing communication; access to training and experience focused on developing an effective crisis response or management plan; and support from their governing boards needed to foster a balance of health and wellness strategies, aimed at positive coping strategies,

beneficial to individuals navigating the multifaceted demands, and stress, associated with a

prolonged crisis.

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APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL LETTER

FERRIS STATE UNIVERSITY

Date: December 21, 2020

To: Susan DeCamillis, EdD, Michelle Barkley, Curtis Oldfield
From: Gregory Wellman, R.Ph, Ph.D, IRB Chair
Re: IRB Application *IRB-FY20-21-78 Illinois Presidents in Crisis*

The Ferris State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application for using human subjects in the study, *Illinois Presidents in Crisis(IRB-FY20-21-78)* and Approved this project under Federal Regulations Expedited Review Approved 7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

Your protocol has been assigned project number IRB-FY20-21-78. Approval mandates that you follow all University policy and procedures, in addition to applicable governmental regulations. Approval applies only to the activities described in the protocol submission; should revisions need to be made, all materials must be approved by the IRB prior to initiation. In addition, the IRB must be made aware of any serious and unexpected and/or unanticipated adverse events as well as complaints and non-compliance issues.

This project has been granted a waiver of consent documentation; signatures of participants need not be collected. Although not documented, informed consent is a process beginning with a description of the study and participant rights, with the assurance of participant understanding. Informed consent must be provided, even when documentation is waived, and continue throughout the study.

As mandated by Title 45 Code of Federal Regulations, Part 46 (45 CFR 46) the IRB requires submission of annual status reports during the life of the research project and a Final Report Form upon study completion. Thank you for your compliance with these guidelines and best wishes for a successful research endeavor.

Regards,

Gregory Wellman, R.Ph, Ph.D, IRB Chair
Ferris State University Institutional Review Board