

The Impact of University Senior Leadership During the Covid-19 Pandemic Through the Lens of Kouzes And Posner Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership (FELT) Framework

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Abstract

University presidents are accountable for the health and welfare of their institutions. Previous research has established a need for crisis preparation and planning and experienced leadership to address and manage crisis events at higher education institutions (Bhaduri, 2019; Shaw, 2017). Not all institutions possess the necessary leadership and crisis management capabilities to respond effectively to crises (Burrell & Heiselt, 2012; Shaw, 2017). This qualitative phenomenological study examined the lived experiences and practices of university senior leadership in higher education, using Kouzes and Posner (2011) Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership Theory (FELT). The study was designed to explore and understand university senior leadership best practices from the Covid-19 pandemic inception to the present by analyzing data from interviews. The study sampled twenty participants, from two institutions of higher learning. The data collected during the interviews were analyzed using participant responses. The major themes that emerged from the findings for perceived leadership practices employed during COVID-19 were Inspire a Shared Vision, Challenge the Process, Encourage the Heart, and the non-FELT leadership practices of Accountability, Decision-Making Capabilities, and Integrity. The extent of the five constructs and their impact on university senior leadership were Inspire a Shared Vision, Challenge the Process, Enable Others to Act, and Encourage the Heart. The perceived leadership characteristic was Model the Way. The major findings also indicated the convergent leadership characteristics of Confidence and Faith displayed by the university senior leadership.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, crisis management, university senior leadership, higher education

Introduction

In the midst of a pandemic, the coronavirus (COVID-19) has shaped university senior leadership in areas not often trained for crises (Fortunato et al., 2018; Gigliotti, 2017; Holzweiss & Walker, 2020). Many higher education institutions' leaders are not prepared to manage a crisis and senior administration is critical during a crisis (Fortunato et al., 2018; Gigliotti, 2017; Holzweiss & Walker, 2020). Accountability, health, and welfare of students in higher education institutions falls on the presidents. COVID-19 has affected more than 14 million American citizens and resulted in more than 280 thousand deaths (CDC, 2020). The Department of Education [DOE] (2020) responded to the COVID-19 pandemic with \$14 billion in aid, as part of the CARES Act, to the Office of Postsecondary Education as the Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund (HEERF) to support higher education institutions during the pandemic with resources for continual education. In the past several months, the senior leadership of higher education institutions across the United States and worldwide have developed plans for continuing educational institution operations and to help mitigate the virus spread.

When leaders are faced with a quandary, they are often held to higher standards, and training demands intensify (Bleich et al., 2020). In any crisis, such as campus shootings, student unrest, or student suicide, each situation requires leadership experiences, abilities, and principles that higher education institutions must manage (Gigliotti, 2017). Research shows that effective university senior leadership during a crisis requires much more than crisis management which is an ill-defined concept for organizational scholars and practitioners (Fortunato et al., 2018; Gigliotti, 2017; Sirat et al., 2012). Effective leaders manage crisis circumstances to reconstruct personal and organizational achievement goals while sustaining personal resilience (Scott & Webber, 2008).

Crisis events that have occurred in the United States in higher education have included the student occupation of the administration building at Duke University, shooting on the campuses of Grambling State University and Texas Southern University, mass shootings at Northern Illinois University, Santa Monica College, and Virginia Tech, the overwhelming impacts of Hurricane Katrina at many of the higher education institutions, and the current COVID-19 pandemic that has shaped leadership responses in higher education globally (Gigliotti, 2017). This study examined the level of preparedness of university senior leadership to manage a crisis in higher education institutions.

Study Purpose / Research Questions

This phenomenological study examined higher education university senior leadership lived experiences and practices during the COVID-19 pandemic using Kouzes and Posner (2011) Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership Theory (FELT) as the study framework. Understanding institutional senior leadership role in managing crisis provides qualitative data and pragmatic applications relevant to crisis leadership planning. The study research questions focused on the university senior leadership lived experiences using the FELT, Kouzes and Posner (2011) model. For the study, the research questions were: (1) What perceived leadership practices did the higher education institution employ during COVID-19? (2) To what extent were the five constructs of FELT used and their impact on university senior leadership during COVID-19? (3) What were the perceived leadership characteristics of university senior leadership during COVID-19?

Theoretical Framework / Literature Review

This study employed Kouzes and Posner (2011) Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership (FELT) regarding university senior leadership skills while planning and sustaining during COVID-19. The FELT model consisted of five practices and ten exemplary leadership commitments, which provided reliable, trust-based relationships among people to be effective (Kouzes & Posner, 2011).

Table 1

The Five Practices and Ten Commitments of Exemplary Leadership

Practices	Commitments
1. Model the Way	1. Clarify values by finding your voice and affirming shared ideas. 2. Set the example by aligning actions with shared values.
2. Inspire a Shared Vision	3. Envision the future by imagining exciting and enabling possibilities. 4. Enlist others in a common vision by appealing to shared aspirations.
3. Challenge the Process	5. Search for opportunities by seizing the initiative and by looking outward for innovative ways to improve. 6. Experiment and take risks by constantly generating small wins and learning from experience.
4. Enable Others to Act	7. Foster collaboration by building trust and facilitating relationships. 8. Strengthen others by increasing self-determination and developing competence.
5. Encourage the Heart	9. Recognize contributions by showing appreciation for individual excellence. 10. Celebrate the values and victories by creating a spirit of community.

Many pressing university concerns prior to COVID-19 were heightened. Fernandez and Shaw (2020) maintained that promoting active learning from previous crisis events is crucial in enhancing our ability to respond to emergencies. The ambiguity of COVID-19 conditions makes day-to-day learning more difficult. Despite these obstacles, university senior leadership must mitigate barriers to effective learning from crises. They argued that leadership during a crisis should consider connecting with people as individuals, establishing mutual trust, and distributing leadership throughout the organization for effective communication.

As the higher education environment quickly changed in reaction to COVID-19, educational leadership decisions to transition to virtual learning involved many institutions of higher education and their faculty (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020). Traditional educational method was changed with leadership facing complexities and uncertainties not a part of institutional plans (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020). Holcombe and Kezar (2017) research outlined a foundation for understanding higher education transitions and the importance of supportive vertical and hierarchical leaders during a crisis to influence in a time of change. Roache et al. (2020) argued that skilled leadership is imperative in transitioning to a new normal of COVID-19. In addition, they focused on what leaders can achieve based on acquired skills, knowledge, and attitudes required for effectiveness. Therefore, it is important that leaders be trained to respond to the uncertainty and changes during a crisis.

Gigliotti (2020) looked beyond the COVID-19 pandemic and focused on the critical need for triaging needs for strategic decisions that have long-term significance to higher learning. Universities and colleges must change during pandemics and other crises (Gigliotti, 2020). Because higher education institutions are generally not known for agility and speed, the pandemic has created a need for values-based leadership structures to respond to immediate crises (Gigliotti, 2020).

During a crisis, the research of effective leadership practices has indicated connections with Kouzes and Posner (2011) FELT practices (Chow & Leung, 2018). Kouzes and Posner (2011) FELT practices have been investigated in many research studies regarding higher education institutions (Aldighrir, 2013; Brown, 2010; Bartels, 2017; Lester, 2010). Aldighrir (2013) studied university presidents of land-grant universities using Kouzes and Posner (2002) leadership practices. The study used 26 LPI self-survey assessments with five university presidents, including Kouzes and Posner (2002) Five Practices of Leadership, with interviews conducted to answer each research question. The study highlighted the importance of the university president role and responsibilities to the university. The study conclusion identified that university presidents viewed their leadership practices differently and recognized the university presidents' position as the most critical leadership role in the university system in higher education and the university community. Brown (2010) indicated that new presidents of a university should swiftly remove the jaded university parts and face the challenges of accountability, transparency, and metrics to quantify performance. Likewise, Brown (2010) confirmed Aldighrir (2013) conclusion that the university president ability to share strategic planning furthers universities' rating, affordability, and accountability.

Zalaznick (2021) highlighted college barriers and the importance of higher education leadership in career development during and after the pandemic. He noted that Americans are enrolling and completing college at high rates, but the population of graduates has changed due to workforce demands. One of the critical components of advancing higher education to meet demands of a knowledge-based workforce is leadership. He summarized that leadership is the linchpin that holds the institution of higher learning together to synchronize, integrate, and collaborate efforts of the changing workforce requirements. Higher educational leadership must now review, revise, and establish new guidelines to prepare students for the workforce (Zalanick, 2021). At the forefront of the demand, is a group of colleagues often in the shadows of higher education, college, and university academic deans. The group is followed by the need to assess leadership models in higher education. Furthermore, higher education must understand the sociocultural and socioeconomic challenges of the student population. Some of the current leadership issues facing higher education are the vital role of college and university academic deans, assessment of leadership models, and understanding of the sociocultural and socioeconomics of the new student populations (Zalaznick, 2021).

Bebbington (2021) noted that the pandemic had shifted higher education and updated leadership strategies to manage the changes. There was a slight decrease in enrollment at universities in the United States during the pandemic but an overhaul of pedagogics. In addition, the researchers highlighted the pivotal opportunity for leadership in higher education to seize the moment for planning for post-pandemic strategies to modes of delivery of learning in the future. In addition to reviewing and enhancing student support and administration, to be effective, higher education leadership must focus on the faculty needs and develop better pedagogic skills (Bebbington, 2021). Faculty, staff, and students have faced financial complications caused by the pandemic. Universities have received assistance during the pandemic, but many faced a financial crisis with little hope of recovery before the pandemic. He posits that university enrollments will increase due to increased unemployment and workforce restructuring.

Seltzer (2020) identified challenges faced by leadership in higher education, such as financial pressures, student demographic changes, and technological capabilities that will restructure the environment of higher education in the United States. Beyond the challenges of COVID-19, university senior leadership is faced with daily enrollment, admission, student affairs, and academic affairs concerns. There may be no return to pre-COVID days in higher education, and the impact of COVID-19 may change the way the United States educates students for years to come (Seltzer, 2020).

Turk and Ramos (2020) studied university presidents' responses during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study found that university presidents faced long-term institutional issues such as financial viability, faculty and staff mental health, housing, enrollment, and an online learning environment. University presidents major concerns were students' mental health and the mental health of faculty and staff. University presidents at private four-year institutions identified students' mental health and long-term financial viability as major concerns. Presidents of public two-year institutions' most pressing issues were enrollment numbers and students' mental health. The study also noted the importance of understanding the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on higher education leadership as the pandemic increase in cases might result in different priorities for higher education leadership.

Many pressing university concerns prior to COVID-19 were heightened. Fernandez and Shaw (2020) maintained that promoting active learning from previous crisis events is crucial in enhancing our ability to respond to emergencies. The ambiguity of COVID-19 conditions makes day-to-day learning more difficult. Despite these obstacles, university senior leadership must mitigate barriers to effective learning from crisis. Previous research has established a need for crisis preparation and planning and experienced leadership at higher education institutions to address and manage crisis events (Bhaduri, 2019; Shaw, 2017). Not all institutions possess effective leadership and effective crisis management skills needed to respond to crises (Burrell & Heiselt, 2012; Shaw, 2017). Shaw (2017) believes proper crisis preparation and planning aids in ratifying appropriate responses to a crisis and reduces the extended recovery period. Existing crisis management research suggests that university leadership lack of crisis management experience reduces the institution effectiveness and lack of collaboration, communication, and administrative support (Christensen, 2009; Witter et al., 2017). Poor crisis management results in the larger community, students, and the institution faculty and staff lacking confidence, further weakening the institution ability to adequately respond to crises (Coombs, 2015; DuBrin, 2013; Shaw, 2017).

The 2009 outbreak of H1N1 Flu revealed that the approach in which a university senior leadership responds to a crisis has significant implications for its viability (Braunack-Mayer et al., 2013; Park et al., 2010). During the pandemic, more than 100 schools nationwide, public and nonpublic closed, and 24 closed due to confirmed or probable cases of H1N1 flu; others closed out of safeguard in eight states (DOE, 2009). The university senior leadership commitment to provide high-quality care for the members during a crisis provides stewardship, solidarity, equity, trust, and inclusiveness to all stakeholders (Braunack-Mayer et al., 2013). The global impact of COVID-19, similar to H1N1, expanded this crisis to include nongovernmental and governmental organizations to alleviate the spread (Lazarus et al., 2020).

COVID-19 pandemic has undoubtedly been one of the enormous scale pandemics in modern history. The tragedy of COVID-19 has turned business and manufacturing organizations upside down, including higher education institutions. The COVID-19 pandemic left university and college presidents, chancellors, board members, and other administrators jostling for months for plans to continue in-person instruction for the Fall 2020 semester (Seltzer, 2020). Higher education institutions had to operate under new government-mandated requirements, such as social distance, wearing masks, and limiting classroom sizes. In addition, Chohen (2020) noted that the pandemic has continued to rage with uncertainty about how long COVID-19 will last or how the virus will affect the population.

The coronavirus (COVID-19) has shaken higher education, and the pandemic events have extending effects on university senior leadership (Blankenberger & Williams, 2020). Higher education institutions will have to face the challenges of pressure after COVID-19 and the magnified trends of budget cuts, severe ramifications for social equity, and conduits for social mobility (Blankenberger & Williams, 2020). Blankenberger and Williams (2020) noted the longstanding ramifications of the disruption of COVID-19 on higher education administration and discussed the information deficit compared to the students' higher education institutions and the university administration.

Kumar (2020) differentiated from Blankenberger and Williams (2020) research focusing on teaching, learning, and assessing higher education in a COVID-19 shaped world. Teaching, learning, and assessing in higher education must be taken seriously by the university leadership to prevent the destruction of public opinion of higher education (Kumar, 2020). The researcher called for a reimagining of higher education and the pedagogical responsibilities to technology that university leadership must engage in and become ethically responsible for the development or lack thereof (Kumar, 2020). Lancet (2020) agreed with Blankenberger and Williams (2020) and Kumar (2020), identifying three pillars of improving COVID-19 management for higher education institutions, "workforce with skills training experience, relationships, and networks" (p. 583). "Second, necessary resources, including funding, infrastructure, workplace conditions and rights, management, incentives structures, research culture, and academic freedom" (p. 583). Third, "multidisciplinary perspectives supported by science beyond medicine, public health, and policy, including social and behavioral sciences, such as anthropology, psychology, sociology, and media and communication studies" (p. 583). In conclusion (Lancet, 2020) alluded to university leadership need to implement long-term plans to uplift student voices and sustainable research systems during and after post-pandemic.

Leal Filho (2021) analyzed the impact of COVID-19 on higher education institutions and some ways to mitigate them. The study applied sustainability development to higher education institutions and practices university leadership can use on the road to recovery. Specifically, the research examined health burdens, socio-economic problems, disrupted routines, income reductions, and trauma in higher education institutions and the effect of financial challenges that COVID-19 has posed on sustainability.

Jose Sa and Serpa (2020) research acquiesced Blankenberger and Williams (2020), Kumar (2020), Lancet (2020), and Leal Filho (2021) studies on reshaping higher education and the need for university leadership involvement. The researcher synthesized 44 types of articles from five continents and 26 countries from the publication years of 2018-2020 with the keywords “COVID-19,” “higher education,” “leadership,” and “sustainability” (Jose Sa & Serpa, 2020). The researchers showed that higher education institution culture is essential in ensuring academic freedom, critical thinking, and autonomy are protected values with support from the university leadership. Based on the conclusion, university leadership should take an active approach to digital sustainability with the transformation process caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Another critical point in the conclusion is the importance of sustainable development of teaching in higher education; university leadership contributions to policy implications that include faculty and staff.

Kroger (2020) suggested a different undertaking between for-profit and non-profit private and public university leaderships as the economic turmoil continues. On the contrary, Kroger (2020) recommended ten observations on COVID-19 and higher education. The observations discussed the economic growth and employment decline and the need for university leadership to understand new job skills or education program that holds to the personal investment of time and money in learning. The researcher also saw the importance of endowment management, admissions, communications, and career services that might irritate the faculty and attest that enrollment pays higher learning institutions and must focus on university leadership.

Stokes and Slatter (2020) reaffirmed (Kroger, 2020) observations supporting the importance of engagement in effective strategic planning to preserve resources, increase agility, and update business and education models to fit the emerging opportunity for an institution-wide approach. The observations mentioned are appropriate for university senior leadership to strengthen the university, the community surroundings, distance delivery models, and post-pandemic in-person education. However, Stokes and Slatter (2020) advanced the explanation for university senior leadership to actively focus on their institutions' predictive models, contingencies, and future road maps.

Busteed (2021) noted that the pandemic forced university presidential leadership to pay attention to diversity, equity, and inclusion for the student body, faculty, and staff. In addition, he highlighted the lack of priority for diversity, equity, and inclusion in higher education institutions and the accountable metrics that will continue after the pandemic ends. Stokes and Slatter (2020) and Kroger (2020) affirm Busteed (2021) research of strategic planning for a diverse and inclusive student population. Before the pandemic, many higher education institutions did not pay close attention to the increasing demand for fully online and hybrid learning programs to support the knowledgeable workforce. As higher education institutions return to in-person learning after the pandemic, university presidential leadership should explore class delivery options to support students' needs as they have done during the pandemic (Busteed, 2021).

In another study, Lynch (2016) highlighted the importance of diversity of the student population and the faculty and staff representation in online learning in higher education administration. The study noted that 84 percent of full-time professors are White, compared to 16 percent of full-time professors who are minorities, and of those population, 60 percent are male, and 25 percent are White women. Furthermore, the study highlighted the shortage of instructional faculty at colleges and universities in the United States, with 79 percent White and six percent Black. The research recommendations echo the finding of Busteed (2021) study, emphasizing the increased misunderstanding and interpretation of diversity at all levels in higher education administration. The research emphasized the increasingly diverse student population and the decrease of higher education institutions hiring minorities to work in administration roles in the United States. This lack of hiring a diverse faculty and staff lent itself to the beliefs and thought that there might be no intent to become diverse in the academics of said institutions.

Capano and Jarvis (2020) observations are aligned with Huisman et al. (2007) and Lynch (2016) studies and the need to increase diversity in the composition, structure, and governance of higher education administration. The lack of diversity is due to the methodological viewpoints of contradiction in empirical observations about diversity. This has created fundamental or universally forcible burdens on the higher education administration to the omnipresence of diversity at institutions of higher learning (Capano & Jarvis, 2020). Outside of the lack of diversity highlighted during the pandemic, higher education institutions must focus on the changing student population created due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic affected teaching and research, and organizational activities of higher education institutions, caused college and universities to reorganize to remote/online platforms that many of the university presidential leadership had to adapt to the world new situation (Slak et al., 2020). The researchers noted the transition to remote/online learning for many higher education institutions with limited resources and capabilities to conduct remote/online learning during and before the pandemic.

The expansion of professional remote/online competence and experience and student learning and remote accessibility was concerning to many higher education institutions (Busteed, 2021; Gigliotti, 2020; Lynch, 2016; Slak et al., 2020). In addition, of 200 universities worldwide, 12 percent were planning to dismiss faculty and staff due to the transition to remote/online learning and reducing student population during the pandemic (Slak et al., 2020). Slak et al. (2020) emphasized the pandemic effects on higher education in other countries such as Europe, China, India, Australia, New Zealand, North and South America, where many countries closed institutions until the government allowed permission to reopen. They recommended best practices from each country higher education institution in response to the pandemic and new provisions to ensure a safe environment for continued learning during and after the pandemic. In conclusion they noted that as higher education institutions reopen, it is essential to use the policies, procedures, and provisions implemented during the pandemic to maintain positive learning environments for students, faculty, and staff.

Turk et al. (2020) surveyed college and university presidents in the midst of the pandemic to better understand their lived experiences as the pandemic unfolded. Almost 300 presidents completed the survey identifying their significant concerns with the reopening plans for the 2020-21 academic year and assessing the impact of the pandemic on the enrollment and financial stability of the college or university. The college and university presidents highlighted student mental health, long-term financial viability as critical to their survival.

Researchers have conducted studies on the impact of COVID-19 and higher education and presented findings that could have implications for the study of university presidential leadership during a crisis (Blankenberger & Williams, 2020; Jose Sa & Serpa, 2020; Kroger, 2020; Kumar, 2020; Lancet, 2020; Leal Filho, 2021; Stokes & Slatter, 2020). In particular, Blankenberger and Williams (2020) presented the enduring effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the need for university presidential leadership to face the challenges and alleviate any risk now and in the future. Similarly, Kumar (2020) recommended that teaching, learning, and assessing higher education requirements are best displayed when university leadership is involved in the development process. Lacent (2020) established pillars compared to Kroger (2020) observations to help university presidential leadership plan, implement, and transform higher learning institutions during the COVID-19 pandemic in their studies.

Method

Limited qualitative research has been conducted on university senior leadership lived experiences and practices during the COVID-19 pandemic. Creswell and Poth (2018) noted that using a qualitative research design emphasizes using opinions of the population, attitudes, and trends. The use of qualitative methodology in this study allowed for a more in-depth insight into interactions within senior leadership lived experiences and practices at two higher education institutions. The interchange of views between the researchers and study participants allowed for capturing experiences in their primitive origin or essence without interpreting, explaining, or theorizing senior leaders of higher education institutions. This phenomenological study allowed for epistemological foundation for interpretations of the participant voices, not the researchers (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019; Creswell & Poth, 2018). The qualitative methodology allowed the researchers to extract the rich data necessary to understand and apply Kouzes and Posner 6 (2011) FELT leadership concepts to senior leadership management during the COVID-19 pandemic at two institutions of higher learning.

The study assumed that all participants will answer all questions honestly. The researchers acknowledge past experiences as senior level administrators. To limit any prior biases, the researchers bracketed their thoughts and feelings in the resulting interviews and analysis of the data.

Site Selection and Population

The sites were selected based on their mission to serve underrepresented diverse students, faculty, and staff communities. Creswell and Guetterman (2019) described a standardized sampling strategy as that where the sites possess similar traits based on membership in a subgroup. The study sites were two four-year higher education institutions serving predominantly underrepresented students. The public urban higher institutions focus on educating minority populations in the United States. The first institution was founded in 1875 with a student population of 3792 and an administrative staff of more than 40 personnel. The second institution was founded in 1884 with a student population of 998 and an administrative staff of 27. Both higher education institutions are part of the nation's 110 HBCUs.

Sample Selection

The sample for this study consisted of 20 participants, ten from each institution. Each study participant was a full-time employee of the institution serving in the role of either president, vice president, associate vice president, assistant vice president, dean, or director of a major program.

In addition, the participants had one or more years at the higher education institution and in their current roles. The senior university leaders were members or worked closely to plan and execute instructional responses to the institution crisis plan during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The researchers employed purposeful sampling to select the 20 participants to interview for this study. This sample selection was appropriate for the phenomenological study because the quantity was consistent in the sample selection, and composition was an open critical choice to identify a measurable effect with the approach (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researchers searched each higher education institution website and selected all staff or faculty in the roles of president, vice president, associate or assistant vice president, dean, or director of major programs. A total of 77 emails were sent to both higher education institutions. Out of the 77 emails sent, 35 volunteers agreed to participate in the study. After reviewing all volunteered participants, only 20 were selected to participate in the study. Once participants agreed to participate in the study, a written informed consent form was sent with a request to return signed informed consent before the interviews were conducted. Study participants not selected to participate in the study were not employed at the higher education institution for more than a year, had not served in the role of president, vice president, associate or assistance vice president dean, or director of major program for more than a year, or did not work closely to plan and execute instructional responses to the institution crisis plan during the pandemic. The selection of 20 study participants was consistent with Creswell and Poth (2018) description of the standard number of participants for qualitative research.

Data Collection

The interview data for this study were collected using FELT questions designed to assess and understand the leadership lived experiences. Before collecting data, the researchers received approvals from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of both institutions. Data collection procedures included (a) acquiring informed consent from all participants, (b) ensuring the participants are not harmed during the study, and (c) protecting the identity, privacy, and confidentiality of each participant (Yin, 2015b). Yin (2015b) noted the importance of consistency with qualitative research standards in the social sciences and the risk assessment of the study because of human subjects' involvement.

The study participants shared their reflections on the impact of the five constructs, leadership practices, and leadership characteristics. Study participants were the university senior leadership team members and full-time employees of the two institutions. The interviews were semi-formal, allowing study participants to answer open-ended.

The interviews were 60-90 minutes and recorded using Zoom or GoogleMeets; additionally, a research journal was used for notetaking. The research journal was crucial in retaining data gathered during the recordings. The notes gathered allowed the researchers to receive important information from each study participant and make sense of the observations. Interview questions included demographics and research questions. Demographic questions included age, gender, employment status, educational level, and length of time at the institution. In addition, to safeguard the reliability of each study participant interview, all personally identifiable information were recorded and stored. The researchers used pseudonyms to identify participants. A chain of custody was used to protect the research quality and integrity (Barnhill & Barnhill, 2014). Only the researchers had access to the original documents. All interview data and transcripts were encrypted and stored on a secure SanDisk (SD) card in a locked file cabinet and room. In addition, journal notes were locked and stored in a locked file cabinet and room.

Data Analysis Procedures

Data collected during interviews were analyzed using codes, categories, and themes of participants responses. Quirkos software helped the researchers analyze the transcript data by connecting documents to descriptors, excerpts to documents and code, categories, and themes. After the initial interviews, data were transcribed and analyzed to identify codes, categories, and themes for qualitative data analysis. Also, each participant was sent the transcripts for review and accuracy. Privacy, ethics, and confidentiality in any research are vital concerns (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Data were printed from Quirkos and color-coded to ensure accuracy. In addition, the researchers interpreted the data, developed a structural description of how the phenomenon was experienced and explored the phenomenon essence. The researchers also coded the data to reduce subjectivity and clarify preconceptions throughout the study (Yuskel & Yildirim, 2015). Through the Quirkos software, the researchers highlighted and reprinted transcripts to code the data and develop themes using a visual interface, bringing any source of text data from transcripts while comparing the results.

The researchers reviewed data for irrelevant, repetitive, or overlapping statements (Yuskel & Yildirim, 2015). Observation, field notes, and interview recordings were used to verify data sources' accuracy and precise representation. Kouzes and Posner (2011) FELT concepts were used for coding the data, and the use of the leadership theory for the coding and analysis of the data as standard with the methodology of depending on theoretical proposals as the initial and best strategy for data analysis (Yin, 2015b). Kouzes and Posner (2011) FELT concepts formed predetermined construct categories for the analysis framework to code, categorize, classify, and discover primary patterns using Quirkos software (Yin, 2015b; Saldana, 2016). The researchers synthesized descriptions from the interviewer perspective to grasp the lived experience essence (Yuskel & Yildirim, 2015). Consequently, the study sought to uncover and understand the university senior leadership best practices employed from the onset of the pandemic by analyzing data collected from interviews.

Description of Participants and Sample

The 20 study participants were majority female, Black or African American, and reported their marital status as married. Most study participants had either a masters or doctoral degree. Study participants' ages ranged from 25 to 65. Two were in the 25-35 age range, five in the 36-45 age range, eight in the 46-55 age range, three in the 56-65, and two in the 66 and older. Tables 1 and 2 provide a summary of the demographics of study participants.

Table 2

Description of Participants

Pseudonyms	Institution	Age Range	Gender	Education Level	Title
Racheal	M1	25-35	F	Doctoral Degree	Dir
James	M1	45-55	M	Doctoral Degree	AVP
Tony	M1	36-45	M	Doctoral Degree	AVP
Lisa	M1	56-65	F	Doctoral Degree	VP
Mary	M1	45-55	F	Doctoral Degree	AVP
Latrice	M1	45-55	F	Master's degree	Dir
Ruth	M1	56-65	F	Master's degree	VP
Greg	M1	36-45	M	Master's degree	Dir
Ricky	M1	56-65	M	Master's degree	AVP
Charles	M1	45-55	M	Doctoral Degree	Dean
Michelle	M2	36-45	F	Master's degree	Dir
Mark	M2	36-45	M	Master's degree	Dir
Marshall	M2	25-35	F	Master's degree	Dir
Claire	M2	66 and older	F	Doctoral Degree	VP
Debra	M2	45-55	F	Doctoral Degree	AVP
Dorothy	M2	45-55	F	Doctoral Degree	Dean
Brenda	M2	45-55	F	Doctoral Degree	Dean
Angelia	M2	45-55	F	Educational Specialist	Dir
Bob	M2	66 and older	M	Master's degree	Dir
Ronnie	M2	36-45	M	Master's degree	Dir

Note. F= Female; M= Male; VP=Vice President, AVP= Associate or Assistant Vice President, Dir= Director

Table 3
Demographics of Participants

Demographics	<i>n</i>	Percentages (%)
Gender		
Female	12	60
Male	8	40
Age Range		
25-35	2	10
36-45	5	25
46-55	8	40
56-65	3	15
66 and older	2	10
Marital Status		
Married	11	55
Divorced	2	10
Never Married	7	35
Race/Ethnicity		
Black or African American		100
Educational Level		
Doctoral	10	50
Educational Specialist	1	5
Master	9	45

Phenomenological Analysis

The study participants provided a wealth of information to the interview questions. The data gathered during the interviews with study participants were compared to the FELT framework. Through the lived experiences and perceptions of the study participants, themes are presented in five categories, which include the following components: (a) Model the Way, (b) Inspire a Shared Vision, (c) Challenge the Process, (d) Enable Others to Act, and (e) Encourage the Heart. In addition, convergent themes emerged from the data collected from the study participant interviews and indicated that each of the FELT constructs was identified by study participants as leadership practices used by senior leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The first cycle of coding that addressed RQ1 resulted in three themes. The first set of themes that emerged from the findings was organized into the major types of leadership used by the study participants. The perceived leadership practices employed by senior leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic were Model the Way, Inspire a Shared Vision, and Encourage the Heart. Although the study participants mentioned several practices, only six used Enable Others to Act and Challenge the Process. Therefore, it was removed during the second cycle. The alignment of the interview and research questions identified themes of leadership practices not part of the FELT constructs by analyzing study participant responses. The non-FELT leadership practice of Accountability and Confidence emerged as significant theme for leadership practices in the data analysis, along with Decision-Making Capabilities, Faith, and Integrity about perceived leadership practices employed by senior leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic are discussed below.

Table 4

Categories of Themes: Research Question 1

Research Question	Themes	Sub-themes
What perceived leadership practices did the university employ during COVID-19?	1. Model the Way	1. Lead by example.
	2. Inspire a Shared Vision	2. Focus on the mission.
	3. Encourage the Heart	3. Values and victories are celebrated.

RQ1 asked: What perceived leadership practices did the university employ during COVID-19?

Theme 1.1: Model the Way

Participants in the study identified university senior leadership using Model the Way. Participants in the study emphasized the importance of reaffirming shared principles and values through action consistent with shared values. In addition, Kouzes and Posner (2011) highlighted those leaders who practice the FELT construct of Model the Way understand that to earn others' commitment and uphold the highest standards, they must model the behavior they expect of those they lead. For example, some study participants explained how Model the Way was used. Although Ruth identified Inspire a Shared Vision and Model the Way, the study participants noted a greater involvement from university senior leadership using Model the Way:

Ruth stated:

There was a "lead by example" approach that I took on with seeking to guide those within my purview. While there was much uncertainty from our state agency and accreditor, we had a response in short order to ensure a successful and safe transition at the start of the pandemic. Given that the information was shared with me and the executive first, it was important that my response to the uncertainty was made so in a controlled manner. Overall, I have to model and control characteristics so that those within my line of view would do the same for their respective workstreams.

James stated, "We developed a taskforce of employees across disciplines and aligned safety protocol according to CDC guidelines." In addition, Brenda stated: "The university exemplified Modeling the Way by putting together a COVID response team and training per health department guidelines. They also followed best practices utilized by similar institutions." In support, Lisa said, "As a part of the senior leadership, a task force was developed to handle the challenge of the pandemic. The president required a daily update from the Task Force and provided a guide to the team in order to maintain one voice." Along the same lines, Claire stated, "I would say that the "Model the Way" practice truly had the biggest impact. Over communicating of details that you otherwise derail institutional practices was a benefit of mine. I had to be more visible than I would be in the physical environment. That included calling ad hoc division meetings to ensure my staff knew I was present and actively working for the institution at home."

Theme 1.2: Inspire a Shared Vision

The second practice identified was "Inspire a Shared Vision." Mark felt, "We wanted to be proactive and keep the students, faculty along with staff safe. We made sure that all had protective supplies." In support, Mary stated, "The university did have a holistic Inspire a Shared Vision plan. Everyone was invited to participate or share suggestions in the plan."

Marshall expounded as follows: "While we were physically displaced in a reactionary manner to "stop the spread" we still had to focus on our institutional mission and maintain a level of service in the absence of being in the presence of our captive audience." Racheal agreed by saying, "Through continual Zoom engagements with my leadership and a part of the COVID task force, we earmarked goals that could be achieved while working remotely to upload the mission and vision of the university." Furthermore, Latrice stated:

The university president established an overall agenda and a model for officers to follow to implement previously established priorities. The president provided us with an overview of the directives and what we needed to do to ensure the long-term success of students, faculty, and staff.

Theme 1.3: Encourage the Heart

“Encourage the Heart” was another practice used by study participants during the COVID-19 pandemic. Bob stated:

I recognized that we all were impacted by this pandemic and that those working from home were working under new pressures they may not have ever experienced. A great effort was placed on mental health and ensuring no screen burnout. In the traditional face-to-face environment, we recognized that one could “unplug” but recognized that it was an even greater challenge when you have to do it from home.

In addition, Michelle mentioned, “Encouraging the heart is a huge part of our leadership. Our values and victories are wholeheartedly celebrated.” Tony stated, “The president provided updates and reassurance to students and staff that measures are being taken to make sure the campus is equipped and cleaned regularly.” Ricky felt that the senior leadership displayed Challenge the Process and Enable Others to Act, but the leadership displayed Encourage the Heart more. Other study participants provided insights into Challenge the Process and Enable Others to Act of their experiences as senior leaders at the university. Ricky stated, “As a senior leader of the university, I used the pandemic as an opportunity to enhance the university. I told the administration that this was the time for us to reset and align the university with some of the processes and systems we wanted and needed to implement.” In support, Ronnie said:

Encouraging the Heart was very important. There was so much death and illness during this time. So that meant I had to genuinely show that I cared for the staff beyond their work for the university. They needed to know I recognized them as people with families. It was important to acknowledge the emotional hold that COVID-19 has on the staff.

Several study participants stated that their primary responsibility as university senior leaders was to ensure the universities' reopening and sustainability for students, faculty, and staff. The non-FELT practices were compared to accountability, decision-making capabilities, and integrity. Participants in the study demonstrated that those influencers had a sizable impact on senior leadership. Additionally, university senior leadership felt unprepared for the pandemic and relied heavily on government officials to fill policy and procedural gaps.

Table 5

Categories of Themes: Research Question 2

Research Question	Themes	Sub-themes
To what extent were the five constructs of FELT used and their impact by the university presidential leadership during COVID-19?	1. Inspire a Shared Vision	1. Set guidance and provide information to the institution
	2. Challenge the Process	2. Continual engagement in professional development
	3. Enable Others to Act	3. Transparent and setting realistic expectations
	4. Encourage the Heart	4. Constantly reassure and contribute to great milestones

RQ2 asked: “To what extent were the five constructs of FELT used and their impact by university presidential leadership during COVID-19? “

Theme 1.4: Inspired a Shared Vision

University senior leadership must understand that there can be no leaders without willing followers. Dorothy said, “As a leader, you must remain humble, solicit others, and value their opinions.” For example, there was an expectation in Angelia’s voice as she recalled her conversation with the university senior leadership. Angelia stated:

I foster collaboration in my department by being transparent and setting realistic expectations. When you openly communicate all aspects of what is expected, there is a greater possibility that collaboration can take place and set an atmosphere of excellence, not excuses.

According to Ronnie, “Enabling others to act means empowering and encouraging staff to do their jobs. This means that they should be reassured that they are able to be successful.”

Debra also discussed strategies for sharing papers and providing choice means openly communicating the opportunities for engagement in the different roles:

This differs for faculty, staff, and students. When all parties understand what options are available to them, they can proactively engage if they choose to. Greg knew that inspiring a shared vision means being impressionable and working in a way that those under the participant leadership will “buy into” the institution goals. In addition, the participant noted that to model inspiring a shared vision is to support all events physically and financially.

In support, Mark stated:

Inspiring a vision requires both actions and words. The greater emphasis is on my actions of me as a leader. People need to see it happening in order to feel inspired. Also, personality plays a role to get those to be inspired to share the leadership vision. You have to be respected by the other leaders and staff at the university. If those under or around you don't respect you, they will be less likely to be inspired by your vision.

Even though “Inspired a Shared Vision” played a significant role for the study participants, non-FELT leadership practices of Confidence and Faith were noted during the data analysis process. Consequently, the study participants were excited about the possibilities that were implemented at each university during the pandemic to enhance the institutional sustainability. This led to the study participants developing ideas that would help advance the university during the pandemic.

Theme 1.5: Challenge the Process

The practice of “Challenge the Process” was identified and used to discover opportunities and incorporate innovative ways to enhance each institution. During the onset of crisis planning for the pandemic, study participants were asked how Challenge the Process was implemented into new or updated guidelines. Charles said, “Challenging the process means to me that we have to “dare to do it differently.” Too often, we are comfortable with what is familiar and nothing about this pandemic is familiar to my colleagues or me!” Furthermore, Ronnie mentioned that continual professional development engagement allowed processes to be challenged during the pandemic. Many of the faculty and staff that have never engaged with the senior leadership of the university voices were heard. According to Lisa:

There was an instance in which I challenged my peers on the taskforce to review the way in which we admitted students during the pandemic. The goal was to increase enrollment but streamline the admission process to a three-step process instead of the current five-step process. This challenge was not received well but was implemented with a hard deadline from the university president. As a result, enrollment increased by 10 percent and the university implemented a rolling admission like proprietary schools for online degree programs.

Ruth noted that “the restrictions given during the COVID-19 pandemic on university operations from the state and federal levels were outlined for the safety and protection of the students, faculty, and staff. However, there were many challenges with the federal funds' restrictions. The university could do only so much with the funding to help the overall institution.” Lisa also noted that COVID-19 had a total impact on the university daily operations, but the leadership was engaged in mitigating the overall challenges for the university. Marshall added:

Everything with COVID and our multiple transitions to respond to the needs of our students was a challenging process. There had to be a focus on safeguarding our data and securing students' information while we were not within the confinements of our own firewalls. The goals to prioritize meant that we always needed to meet the needs of our students from any location that might have brought a cyber threat to the university. The physical distance and limited resources for our students that were disconnected from the confinements of our campus meant an expectation for almost every process needed to action from the leadership. The major challenge was ensuring an equitable experience for those students who did not have resources that would be provided for them on campus.

Other study participants indicated that Challenge the Process was a critical practice during the pandemic. Bob summarized the usage of the Challenge the Process as follows:

During the pandemic, as a leader, I was forced to think outside of the box without leaders on the campus. This was the first time in our history that we would have to tell students they would not be allowed on campus. We knew that some of the students were homeless, and the dorm was their only place. So we developed a plan for those students to remain on campus and reach out to some of the local food chains to provide food to the students. The process was challenging for the staff and me because there are funding restrictions that the university much abides by.

Study participants' responses showed evidence that Challenge the Process was important to the pandemic decision-making process. Regardless of the student population, study participants focused on the faculty, staff, and students to find innovative ways to ease the burden of attending college during the pandemic.

Theme 1.6: Enable Others to Act

One of the major concerns for many of the study participants was building trust and facilitating relationships in a virtual environment for the first time in the university history. Because of the government shutdown, each university had to operate a fully online community through virtual meetings and all student learning was transferred online. At one of the institutions, many of the students lived in rural communities and were limited in internet connectivity and faced other limited resources to continue their education during the pandemic. In addition, other limited resources created burdens for students, faculty, and staff, such as access to computers and housing. Study participants built trust and fostered relationships through virtual means to ensure the university community was all on the same page. In this regard, Latrice stated:

There was a truce interdependence amongst all units during this time. One thing that was understood was that we all needed one another to be successful by keeping the “virtual doors open.” This was challenging for those who were not fully engaged. The leadership was in person and most of that personnel resigned. However, for those who stayed on board, it was apparent that Zoom and other video conference platforms, along with emails, would be our best friends when looking to stay connected. Everyone who was displaced was expected to act within good judgment and reason of the institution to ensure we embraced the ebbs and flow from the pandemic and provided total support to students.

Greg stated, “We were encouraged to walk away from our work for a short time period and hopefully return renewed to complete the semester. As a result, the leadership found a great trust in the university president and encouraged others along with myself to continue the good fight.” In addition, Mark stated:

Holding departmental meetings with my team and being a part of the leadership COVID-19 taskforce allowed me to build trust with my team because I was a part of the decision-making process, and my team knew I had firsthand information when updates were provided and this fostered a bond with the team and me along with my leadership.

During this moment in the pandemic, the study participant was in a dual role and could level his staff and provide critical information from the bottom up to the university senior leadership. So the study participant would provide information during the daily task force meeting regarding the viewpoints of faculty and staff about the decision made that would affect instructional guidelines when proposed by the COVID-19 task force. In addition, the university president assigned him as the leader to be the spokesperson for many concerns that were not often brought to the taskforce attention. The study participant developed trust and essential relationships with his department and other department personnel throughout the university, which led to more effective planning and adjustments to online learning for the faculty and staff members.

The study participants outlined the essential staff that would need access to the campus and that the university law enforcement should be provided the list and only grant access to faculty and staff reviewed by the committee and approved by the president or provost. Claire was concerned about the distance and accessibility on campus. He noted that he did not trust the leadership to ensure the university law enforcement would be in place to provide staff the need to return to campus for information documents or information that was critical to the success of their jobs on campus. Brenda was also concerned about trust with some of the personnel assigned to the university for safety reasons.

Since Brenda worked in law enforcement, she could use personal examples of what will be needed to ensure that safety procedures were followed.

The university employees would not ignore these procedures due to the short notice of the shutdown and employees' needs to return to campus to retrieve documents or other work materials. Lisa was concerned about building trust to ensure the entire university understood what was going on at the university. That communication was only sent to the Presidential Leadership Team, which commented, "I would ask staff if they had any questions or concerns around communication." This was important to Mark and Lisa because the study participants wanted to ensure that faculty and staff inputs were addressed and that they mattered in the decision-making process. Therefore, building trust and fostering positive relationships was important and helped the leaders communicate with the university leadership and departments.

Theme 1.7: Encourage the Heart

The fourth strongest theme that emerged regarding the extent to which the five constructs of FELT were used and impacted the university presidential leadership during COVID-19 was Encourage the Heart. This practice included contributions by showing appreciation for individual excellence. The university presidential leadership sought opportunities to inform faculty, staff, and students of their commitment to their safety and how they appreciated their quick reaction to the sudden change in learning due to the pandemic. Conversely, the university leadership teams developed approaches to show appreciation during the pandemic. In response, Racheal stated, "Encourage the heart as an executive leader means that you have to inspire those around you to believe and continue to do great work in tough situations. Most of this is centered around the university mission and the other members on the team."

In support of Racheal, Greg mentioned, "I encourage the heart by making sure that all of those within my purview understand that their work matters and they matter. I constantly reassure them that they are valued and contribute to the university milestones." As many changes were made in reaction to the pandemic, the study participants highlighted the need to take time to appreciate other members of the university presidential leadership. Marshall said:

I showed other members of the member appreciation through early release time and by providing lunch for the team. I understand that the pandemic affects each of us differently, but it has an effect. I want the team to know that I appreciate the hard work that was being done at the university. Also, I made sure to provide public recognition of gratitude when I was given opportunities to speak to the media on the part of the university.

Ricky stated:

I would say that "celebrating the values and victories by creating a spirit of community" is crucial for presidential leadership regarding the impact of COVID-19. People need to know that leadership appreciates what they bring to the table. In this pandemic, everyone lost. Not just this university, but all universities lost people they cared about and had impacts on their daily lives. There were so many losses that were experienced, and the university president must celebrate the victories during the pandemic for everyone. Those doing the work need to know that they are a part of a greater force through the continually changing work requirements.

In addition, to showing the faculty, staff, and students that the university leadership cared about what they were doing for themselves and the university. Michelle commented that when opportunities were presented to the leadership, the president would lead by example daily and support the faculty and staff with a token of appreciation and annual retreats. The annual retreats must happen in a virtual environment in the first stage of the pandemic, but the other happen under the COVID-19 restriction. For the first time in my 18 years of working at the university, the president was present at all campus events because many of his meetings were canceled or virtual, which opened the president calendar.

To sum up the importance of Encourage the Heart, Bob stated:

COVID-19 practices were set by the presidential leadership and funneled to the middle leadership. The president, in meetings, would often let the team know that he appreciated all the hard work that was being done. For example, the decision was made to a virtual instruction format during the fall semester. The president told everyone before we got into the business of the meeting that he was aware of some of the challenges that would come with this change but wanted us to understand the individual excellence that would go into this effort. Finally, we wanted each leader to ensure their team was celebrated and their value mattered to the university spirit.

Table 6

Categories of Themes: Research Question 3

Research Question	Theme	Sub-theme
What were the perceived leadership characteristics of university senior leadership during COVID-19?	1. Model the Way	1. Set the example by aligning actions

RQ3 stated: What were the perceived leadership characteristics of university senior leadership during COVID-19? All study participants expressed the significance of setting and leading by example by the university senior leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic as the most significant characteristics displayed.

Theme 1.8: Model the Way

Racheal stated:

All administrators, faculty, and staff must be cautious in in-person communications. There were heavy restrictions on capacity, mask-wearing, and traffic flow when we returned in person. Every in-person office visit had to be scheduled to prevent an increase in traffic in certain areas. We had to be disciplined to ensure we were not overpopulating our spaces.

Ruth said, "Being available and acting with kindness was my model way. It was a heavy lift to ensure that business needs were met, but we had to do so in a sensitive manner as everyone was experiencing COVID differently." For Latrice, the characteristic of university senior leadership must reassure each person at the university that they can overcome and get back in the swing of operation, and I was the model and example as the university leader. It was important for me to lead from the front." The study participant knew that leading my experience was the best way to ensure that his personnel was engaged and understood that he was experiencing the same issues but was there to lead the university to a safety transition based on COVID-19 limitations. Also, the study participant would address any major changes that would impact the university and assume responsibility for the issues.

Greg stated, "Model the Way is the leadership characteristic that fits into my daily planning and sustainable practices during and following the immediate impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. As a member of the Academic Affairs Leadership Team and the COVID-19 committee, I was charged with relaying all COVID practices outlined by the President to those who reported directly to me." Moreover, university senior leadership took risks by constantly generating small wins and learning from the experiences. These experiences strengthened self-determination and competence within the leadership team and the universities. Angelia mentioned, "We strategically brought staff back to campus and allowed flexible work schedules. We made vaccines available for those who wanted the shot and provided additional guidance for those that did not." Charles noted that the leadership "developed a contingency plan to include future crises that might result in students having to continue their education from home or away from the campus."

In addition, the study participant emphasized the importance of envisioning the future and imagining exciting and enabling possibilities. Through envisioning the future, the study participant felt that guidance to develop a crisis contingency plan for the university to function entirely virtual was a reality that might happen again. However, the next time around, the university would be better prepared to support the university entire community. Mark concurred by saying, "COVID-19 brought some of the weaknesses and threats that lay dormant at the university. We were prepared for smaller crises, but nothing of this magnitude. We had to go back to the drawing board and implement a plan that would work for the next crisis of this magnitude."

Ricky stated, "The university has to go to a virtual environment. We reassured students that each one would continue to receive a quality education. Resources were made available for students and faculty. We also made sure academic integrity was not compromised during the transition." Mary indicated that leading by example was a vital characteristic needed during the pandemic. The study participant stated, "It was complicated to transition to a virtual environment, but the leadership did not see our past failure as a mean to belittle, but as a time of learning to better the university." When study participants used Model the Way characteristics, they were able to observe employee dedication and positivity about the recovery of the universities during the pandemic. These lessons included researching best practices for modeling documents, class schedule layouts, classroom protocol for virtual attendance, and information assurance.

Conclusion

The problem examined in this study is that many higher education institutions' senior leadership are unprepared to manage significant crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, because university presidents are ultimately liable for their institutions' well-being (Cowen, 2020; Davis, 2015; Devitt & Borodzicz, 2008; Holzweiss & Walker, 2018). Previous studies have demonstrated the importance of crisis preparation in higher education institutions (Holzweiss & Walker, 2018; Wilcox, 2021). Using FELT as a theoretical framework, this study sought to examine the leadership practices of university senior leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study was necessary to understand best practices in higher education crisis leadership (Armant, 2015; Barnhill & Barnhill, 2014; Gigliotti, 2017, 2020; O'Connor, 2018). The study findings may provide higher education leaders with effective practices for leading during times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, and may serve as a platform for future research on the leadership characteristics required to handle higher education crises. College and university leaders are encouraged to demonstrate accountability, decision-making capabilities, and integrity practices during times of crisis, to emphasize the use of the FELT constructs of Inspire a Shared Vision, Challenge the Process, and Encourage the Heart during times of crisis, and to demonstrate confidence and faith daily as well as during times of crisis. Future research should consider applying the qualitative phenomenological methodology used to study university senior leadership, including the president, vice presidents, associate vice presidents, assistant vice presidents, deans, and directors of major programs, to other types of institutions of higher education with distinct missions and constituencies, as well as the perceptions of students enrolled about university senior leadership use of the FELT constructs. The findings of this study may be used by current higher education institution senior leadership, those interested in pursuing a college or university presidency or executive role, and even departmental higher education administrators and faculty who wish to learn more about and effectively apply best practices for leading personnel to accomplish desired goals and objectives, both in response to a crisis and as part of the college continuous improvement process. The COVID-19 pandemic will not be the last crisis to affect higher education institutions in the United States, and much may be learned from the theoretical perspectives of higher education leaders who directed a university and a community through unusual circumstances.

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