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A Phenomenological Study Into Niche Marketing In Higher Education

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A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY INTO NICHE MARKETING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

As higher education continues to face declining enrollment and financial pressures from decreased funding, colleges and universities must find innovative ways to differentiate themselves from competing institutions through niche marketing initiatives. This qualitative, phenomenological study developed existing research and addressed a gap in the literature as it relates to niche marketing in higher education. The research objective of this study was to illustrate the perceived value of niche marketing in light of the shifting trends in marketing, the increased competition colleges and universities face, and the need to isolate the uniqueness of a university. This study further identified individuals who lead marketing efforts, exploring their perspectives on niche marketing initiatives at their respective institutions and the perceived effectiveness of such initiatives on increasing student enrollment.

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"Are we family or what?"

Gord Downie (2004).

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The marketing environment continues to change and evolve as consumer behaviors produce new consumer wants and needs (Goldsmith & Moutinho, 2017). Even though consumer wants and needs change over time, Lamb, Hair, and McDaniel (2012) suggested that management should (a) primarily focus on consumer satisfaction, (b) focus on profit over sales, and (c) incorporate the different elements of the marketing plan into a consistent strategy. Goldsmith and Moutinho (2017) stated that “successful firms will always excel in creating long-term, profitable relationships with customers based on their ability to identify and to satisfy their needs and wants via coherent, consistent strategies” (p. 37). Marketing managers must continue to adapt to future consumers’ wants and needs.

Vriens and Kidd (2014) proposed that marketers of the future will use advanced analytics and big data to help to drive profits. Vriens and Kidd further proposed that marketers will use these analytics in the six following ways:

1. Market forecasting – using models in a predictive way to analyze behavior by geographic region.
2. Quantifying needs and motivations – modeling ways to quantify emotional behavior and to predict needs prior to the customer acting on the need.
3. Analyzing drivers of brand share – modeling how brand perception helps to predict brand choice most effectively.
4. Product and pricing optimization – determining the best mix to optimize profitability.
5. Marketing mix and marketing efficiency modeling – using analytics to help to determine whether efforts are working.

6. Customer dynamics – modeling and predicting customers' most likely next product and lifetime values.

Adding to these levers of change, McKinsey and Company (2015) stated that the second most noticeable trend changing in marketing is the Internet of Things IoT). The new use of physical devices across the Internet is allowing marketing managers access to data relating to the whole value chain (Goldsmith & Moutinho, 2017). Looking further at the research of eMarketer (2015), top executives at global companies have identified and ranked the following marketing priorities: (a) customer experience, (b) big data, and (c) real-time personalized transactions (Goldsmith & Moutinho, 2017). In this sea of changes, looking at and reaffirming niche directions has never been more important.

According to Goldsmith and Moutinho (2017), there is a consistent theme from marketing consulting firms that "all types must adapt their strategies to the new realities of a changing marketplace in which consumers are enabled by technology to consume differently than in the past" (p. 37). Goldsmith and Moutinho further mentioned that many consulting firms recommended changes in marketing management in the future. For example, Gordon and Perrey (2015) stated that the five core principles of marketing management for the future are:

1. Science – advances in data, modeling, and analysis allow precise measurement and management of customer decisions and more targeted spending.
2. Substance – marketers can directly shape the business by evolving the customer experience and the development of products and services.
3. Story – the ways to tell a story are morphing continually, drawing on richer digital interaction and more powerful communications tools.

4. Speed – consumer preferences, market dynamics, and product life cycles change with stunning velocity in a digital economy.
5. Simplicity – complexity is the enemy of speed, and leading marketers are seeking greater simplicity

Niche market methods, such as utilizing technology and engaging constituents to identify their unmet needs, can assist a college or university in differentiating itself from its competitors by creating a niche to service the unmet needs of the students (Goldsmith & Moutinho, 2017; Kokolus, 2016). The term *niche market* identifies a subset of the market that an institution creates to meet consumer needs that current competitors are not addressing (Kokolus, 2016). Kokolus (2016) further separated a market niche into two identifiable categories: a simple niche and a mass niche. A simple niche promotes programmatic customization and it limits the overall targeted population for the initiative. Oftentimes, marketers can increase the price of the product due to its specialization and customization. A mass niche promotes greater efficiency, productivity, and thus profitability. The overall targeted population increases, and the increased demand can bring the overall cost of the product down based on simple supply and demand principles. Vermeulen (2015) suggested asking questions about a particular subset such as, "what things can be eliminated for this particular group, without much affecting its willingness to pay?" (p. 1). Vermeulen's research ties into the work of Lamb et al. (2012) by helping to define the needs of a subgroup and by eliminating wants such as a particular restaurant, a separate bar, or a spa from the research. Separating wants from needs was an important step in Vermeulen's research; yet deciding what to reduce or eliminate does not seem to come naturally to many executives.

This study explored how loosening higher education institutions from a sea of sameness via technology and data-enabled niche marketing may be a viable growth strategy. For example, consider print and television ads for universities. With a few exceptions, the print and television ads look the same. Not only are the images similar, but so are the words, phrases, and overall messaging. This study explored how a customized marketing approach may add value to the met and unmet needs of prospective students. This transformational approach starts with leveraging technology and data, niche marketing strategies, and innovative leadership. With this information as a background, this qualitative, phenomenological study examined the perceptions of niche market initiatives by various higher education marketing decision makers. It explored how participants perceived these initiatives in an effort to increase student enrollment. The goal of this study was to illustrate the perceived value of niche marketing in light of the shifting trends in marketing, increased competition among colleges and universities, and the need to isolate the uniqueness of a university. This is an important area of study given the extreme financial strain facing higher education, given the societal and demographic shifts, and because full-fledged rebranding is a very expensive endeavor (Shepard, 2015).

Statement of the Problem

Many universities are facing prolonged periods of declining enrollment (Marcus, 2017). These universities find themselves at a pivotal juncture, with financial pressures surrounding them (Schackner, 2019). Among other areas in which intentional change is necessary, for a competitive and mature industry like higher education, ensuring the right marketing approach is central to success. For purpose of this study, this means higher education adopting a distinct focus on a specific customer segment. Colleges and universities can do this via analysis to identify viable market segments and then to meet the needs and interests of the targeted customer groups. This may be a path to a more sustainable competitive position for universities.

Universities must begin to engage in marketing strategies that embrace the changing consumer landscape to ensure stable futures for themselves. The marketing model for higher education is shifting away from the traditional output of the organization to a model in which the value relates to the benefit the customer experiences (Vargo, Maglio, & Akaka, 2008). For universities to remain financially stable and vibrant, they must find creative ways to differentiate themselves from competing institutions through niche market initiatives.

This qualitative, phenomenological study documented the marketing initiatives higher education marketing leaders employ and their perceptions of how the niche market initiatives help to increase student enrollment.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine perceptions of select niche market initiatives by university marketing decision makers through their lived experiences of niche marketing. It examined the perceptions of these leaders through specific strategies they used and their perceptions on how effective the initiatives were in increasing enrollment.

This qualitative, phenomenological study examined the marketing initiatives higher education marketing leaders employed and their perceptions on how the niche market initiatives help to increase student enrollment. There is currently a lack of qualitative studies relating to niche market initiatives in higher education that effect student enrollment. The specific goal of this study was to contribute to the existing literature by illustrating perceptions of leaders using these strategies through the lens of initiatives they have undertaken.

As higher education continues to face declining enrollment and financial pressures from decreased funding, colleges and universities must find creative ways to differentiate themselves from competing institutions through niche market initiatives. This qualitative, phenomenological study offers further insight into the perceptions of various niche market initiatives by university marketing decision makers.

Research Questions

The research questions for this study were:

1. What are the lived experiences of marketing leaders in higher education in the state of Pennsylvania?
2. What strategies and initiatives do higher education marketing leaders perceive as effective?
3. How do higher education marketing leaders perceive the effect of the university's culture on marketing initiatives?

Conceptual Framework

Higher education has a reputation of adapting to change slowly, and many studies show a correlation to organizational change and senior leadership (Titterton, 2013). Referencing a 2013 study by the American Council on Education and the College and University Professional Association for Human Resources, Titterton (2013) reported that Bell-Rose, a senior managing director and head of the TIAA-CREF Institute, stated that diversity in a leader's background and thought process helps to create fresh perspectives and ideas. On the other hand, the business environment changes rapidly, and successful business leaders must keep pace in an effort to stay competitive (Chachra, 2014). The conceptual framework arranges a synthesis of topics that help to provide a relationship between the interconnectedness of the shifting marketing principles and the perceptions of various niche market initiatives by university marketing decision makers through their lived experiences of niche marketing.

As Freund (2017) explained, the concept of shared leadership arises from the need to navigate the complex pressures in traditional bureaucratic organizational structures. As McCully and McDaniel (2007) pointed out, universities are among the most bureaucratic and traditional institutions; yet, in the Information Age, agility is key for success and survival. McCully and McDaniel focused on a government-sponsored graduate-level college that transformed to develop agility. The program's agility focuses on the collaborative ability to develop relationships with current students, stakeholders, and the organizational and business environments' needs, thus fostering innovation and initiative (McCully & McDaniel, 2007). Turning these structures into a more inclusive collaborative organization may lead to a more successful niche market initiative by focusing on the needs of the students at a deeper level (Freund, 2017; Kokolus, 2016; McCully & McDaniel, 2007). A typical higher educational structure involves a president or chancellor, vice presidents or chief officers, deans, faculty, directors or associate vice presidents, and staff. There is a clear bureaucratic hierarchy, as Figure 1 shows.

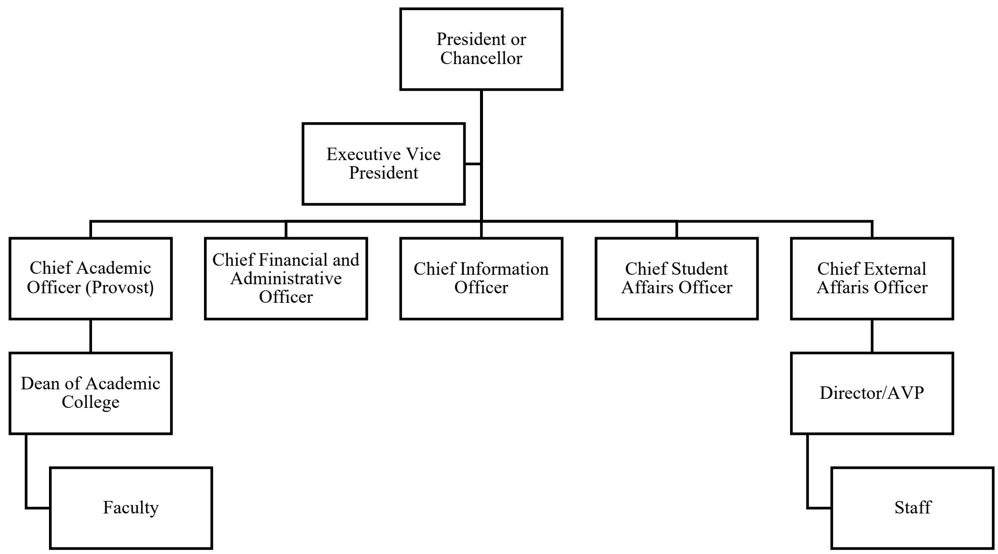

Figure 1. Typical university leadership organizational structure.

Typical University Structure

Colleges and universities in the United States differ based on factors such as institution size, student population, funding source (public or private), and highest degree awarded (whether the degree is an associate's, baccalaureate, master's, or doctorate). Within the various institutions, the specific leadership roles may fluctuate, but most have similar organizational and reporting structures (Burroughs Wellcome Fund & Howard Hughes Medical Institute, 2006). Figure 1 depicts a typical university leadership organizational structure. An explanation of the typical highest level leadership roles within the university setting follows.

Chief executive officer (president or chancellor: The president or chancellor has the overall general oversight of the university, the academic programs, and the overall financial health of the institution. He or she is the public image and spokesperson for the institution. The president deals with big-picture issues and builds and maintains relationships with legislators and other funding bodies, alumni relations, and fundraising (Burroughs Wellcome Fund & Howard Hughes Medical Institute, 2006).

Executive vice president: The duties of executive vice presidents vary. Some executive vice presidents have overall responsibility for ensuring that services are available to support not only administrative functions, but also the multiple activities of faculty and staff (Affleck-Graves, 2012). The executive vice president may also provide leadership for university administrative services, such as accounting, audit and compliance, campus life, facilities, human resources, safety, budget and planning, housing, and dining (Burstein, 2012).

Chief academic officer (provost): The provost has programmatic and budgetary oversight for all academic activities. The provost is responsible for reviewing the appointment letters of new faculty members and he or she receives reports from the promotion and tenure committee. The various academic college deans report to the provost for academic-related matters (Burroughs Wellcome Fund & Howard Hughes Medical Institute, 2006; King & Gomez, 2008).

Chief financial and administrative officer: The chief financial officer is in charge of the fiscal affairs of the university. He or she also often oversees facilities planning and construction, human resources, and campus services such as parking, public safety, maintenance, and mail services (Burroughs Wellcome Fund & Howard Hughes Medical Institute, 2006).

Chief information officer: The chief information officer oversees the university's computer facilities and telephone systems (Burroughs Wellcome Fund & Howard Hughes Medical Institute, 2006).

Chief student affairs officer: The chief student affairs officer is responsible for issues of student well-being, including residence halls, health centers, and recreational facilities (Burroughs Wellcome Fund & Howard Hughes Medical Institute, 2006).

Chief external affairs officer: The chief external affairs officer manages marketing, fundraising, advancement services, development programs, alumni networks, university relations, and government relations (Burroughs Wellcome Fund & Howard Hughes Medical Institute, 2006; King & Gomez, 2008). This individual is oftentimes the person overseeing the marketing initiatives within the university.[1]

As Freund (2017) stated, shared leadership revolves around the concept of delegating decision making down the organizational hierarchy using the autonomy of the team. Managers who recognize and who are willing to let go of complete control of authority, decision-making, and accountability and who turn the focus more towards collaboration and input from the team can accomplish shared leadership (Freund, 2017). As McCully and McDaniel (2007) pointed out, successful organizations need strategies that leverage information for strategic advantage using real-time collaboration that facilitates shared situational awareness. Freund further discussed how the traditional leadership model with a single leader fails to address the complex, multifaceted need for collaboration among the team. The concept of collaboration is also evident in McKiernan and Purg's (2014) research. They noted that successful organizations have decentralized authority. By collecting and leveraging information, an agile organization can customize its product or service to meet the changing needs of current and future customers (McCully & McDaniel, 2007).

Many newer business organizations have taken a more inclusive approach to leadership, and as such, they have built a deeper bench of employees who engage with internal and external constituents on a deeper level (Freund, 2017). This concept is key to identifying a successful niche market, because as Kokolus (2016) pointed out, marketers have to create customer niche markets, and engaging constituents is a first step in identifying an unmet need. Because of this new perspective on leadership, the older, more bureaucratic framework is struggling to meet the

[1] I am indebted to Diehl (2013), who allowed me to adapt the structure of part of her dissertation for this section.

relationship needs of the changing environment. As Rohan and Boker (2011) suggested, universities will need to differentiate themselves through unique marketing initiatives in an effort to succeed. Using a project management approach by focusing on a niche market and leveraging information technology requires a dramatic change in the types of relationships and the authority style most bureaucratic structures, such as universities, use (Freund, 2017).

As the above discussion illustrates, marketing is evolving with veracity and with high velocity. In this changing environment, higher education is stuck with many institutions marketing the same way. This is creating a challenge, as more institutions are competing for fewer students (Grawe, 2018; Schackner, 2019). Grawe (2018) found that according to the Higher Education Demand Index (HEDI) forecasting model, “demand for regional four-year institutions is stark” (p. 73). The HEDI model predicts that the northeast quadrant of the United States will be on a steady decline until the mid-2020s. Grawe estimated that the net loss in student enrollment will be 20% in the Middle Atlantic region of the United States and 25% in the East North Central, New England, and Middle Atlantic region. The HEDI model uses data from the 2000 Census and it incorporates the number of college students at the national and state level with data from the last two dozen years (Grawe, 2018).

Many universities are at pivotal junctures, with those institutions that are suffering from declining enrollment having financial concerns (Schackner, 2019). The universities must begin to engage a marketing strategy that embraces the changing consumer landscape to ensure a stable future for the institutions. The marketing model for higher education is shifting away from the traditional output of the organization to a *value-creation* model in which the *benefit* the customer experiences is the new value (Vargo et al., 2008). From this standpoint, goods and services then facilitate the creation of value.

The aforementioned theories and principles can help to guide the process of making an organization more inclusive and thus work towards creating a successful niche market in an institution of higher education. By combining an inclusive, shared approach to leadership, the marketing leader can begin to understand external and internal constituents' needs at a deeper level and to tailor marketing initiatives around meeting those needs (Freund, 2017; McCully & McDaniel, 2007). As the research by Liu-Farrer (2011), as developed by Rohan and Boker (2011) suggested, universities can focus on many different initiatives to create a successful niche market. The ideal combination of market forces to create a successful niche market is heavy demand for a product or service, high income potential, and light competition. Figure 2 shows the ideal combination for targeting a successful niche market.

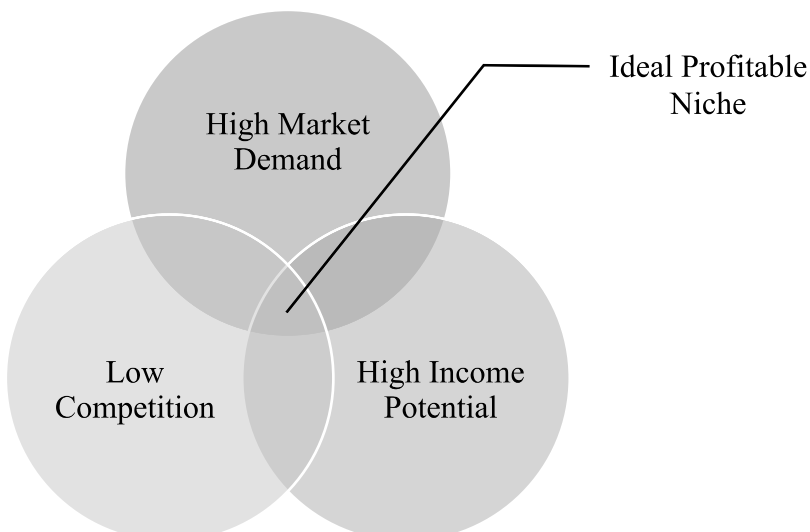

Figure 2. The ideal profitable niche. Reprinted from marketing-schools.org.

Assumptions and Limitations

The assumptions for this phenomenological study were as follows:

- that the study participants have the capacity to implement niche marketing initiatives;

- that the study participants may lack the financial resources necessary to implement all the initiatives they have planned;
- that the study participants may experience leadership challenges within the bureaucratic structure of their institutions;
- that all study participants have a compelling story to tell about their professional experiences with niche marketing;
- that study participants share a common understanding of niche marketing;
- that study participants have actually engaged in niche marketing for their institutions;
- that study participants' accounts of the effectiveness of niche marketing efforts are accurate.

The setting for this study limited this research. This study focused on various institutions of higher education across Pennsylvania, where Grawe (2018) estimated that student enrollment would drop approximately 20% to 25%. Therefore, the participant population for this study is not representative of all institutions in higher education, and its perceptions may not match those of those leading marketing efforts at other institutions outside Pennsylvania.

Significance of the Study

The higher education environment continues to face declining enrollment along with financial pressures from decreased funding (Marcus, 2017). Due to the financial constraints surrounding many universities, and the pivotal economic impact for the regions they serve, there is an increased sense of urgency to address the declining enrollment issues facing higher education. For colleges and universities to remain vibrant, they must find innovative ways to differentiate themselves from competing institutions through niche market initiatives. Studying this phenomenon is significant, because it involves examining the perceptions of select niche market initiatives by university marketing decision makers through their lived experiences of niche marketing and their perceptions of how effective the initiatives were in increasing enrollment. A phenomenological approach allows the researcher to unpack the dimensions of human involvement to help to express common experiences from a group of individuals who share the same circumstances (Daniels, 2005).

Definition of Terms

Collaborative curriculum pathways: Educational offerings that universities design in collaboration with local school district leaders to allow middle-school and high-school students to begin taking college level classes for dual credit (Heileman, Abdallah, Slim, & Hickman, 2018).

Liberal arts university: A college/university that emphasizes liberal arts studies at the undergraduate level rather than emphasizing a professional or technical curriculum (Sheldon, 2017).

Niche market: A segment of a market that services the wants and needs of the intended demographic (Kokolus, 2016).

Niche market curriculum: Curricular offerings by a particular institution that are unique to the institution, that meet an unmet consumer need, and that competing institutions cannot easily replicate (Dow, 2008).

Project management approach: An approach to management that allows the team to work on a particular project and to facilitate any necessary changes by working together to reach the goal (Freund, 2017).

Return on education: A measurement of the skills students gain through obtaining an education in relation to the cost incurred to receive the education (Marsa, 2016).

Value-creation model: The shifting away from the traditional output of the organization to a model in which the customer *benefit* becomes the new value (Vargo et al., 2008).

Whole value chain: The set of operating activities that an organization performs to bring a product or service to the marketplace (Goldsmith & Moutinho, 2017).

Summary

Foster, Wigner, Lande, and Jordan (2018), developing the work of Sheldon (2017), suggested creating a niche in higher education using innovative ideas from the business environment as one way for universities to scale themselves, allowing tailored educational offerings to meet the fast-changing demands of the student. Chapter 1 has focused on an overview of the problem, the purpose of the study, and the structure of the study, which provides further insight into the perceptions of various niche market initiatives by university marketing decision makers in higher education. This may help to increase student enrollment. The objective of this study was to illustrate the perceived value of niche marketing in light of the shifting trends in marketing, increased completion between colleges and universities, and the need to identify the unique niche for a university. Chapter 2 introduces a review of the relevant literature.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The marketing model is shifting away from the traditional output of the organization to a *value-creation* model in which the *benefit* the customer experiences is the new value (Vargo et al., 2008). From this standpoint, goods and services then facilitate the creation of value the consumer perceives.

The literature review presents a selection of the literature relating to the objectives of this phenomenological case study. It starts by discussing niche marketing principles from the business environment. The next section of the literature review focuses on select niche marketing initiatives in higher education. The third section focuses on the economic factors facing higher education. The fourth section focuses on the rational planning model as a way to introduce a decision-making tool that leaders can utilize when developing a niche market initiative. The final section focuses on leadership theories that individuals use across a group of diverse organizations.

Niche Markets in Business

When exploring the creation of a successful niche market, one can point to success stories from the business environment (e.g., Apple); however, as Vargo (2018) pointed out, there is no overarching market theory to help in the application of marketing. Over 50 years ago, Levitt (1960) argued that the product-centric approach to thinking about marketing was flawed; yet even today, as Vargo pointed out, Levitt's *Harvard Business Review* article is one of the most cited marketing articles in history, and it still features in marketing classes around the world. A full understanding of niche marketing in the business environment requires an understanding of the trends and how best to exploit the trend towards success (Lawrence, 2013). These parallels can transcend the business environment, and they are transferrable to the higher education setting. By collecting and leveraging information, an agile institution can customize its product or service and create a niche to meet the changing needs of current and future students (Freund, 2017; Gordon & Perrey, 2015; McCully & McDaniel, 2007). Lawrence (2013) used factual real-life success stories from the business environment to allow the researcher to address (a) the current environment, (b) strategic planning, and (c) the core competencies to developing a niche market successfully. As Figure 3 shows, these core principles work together to help to develop and determine niche markets in the business environment.

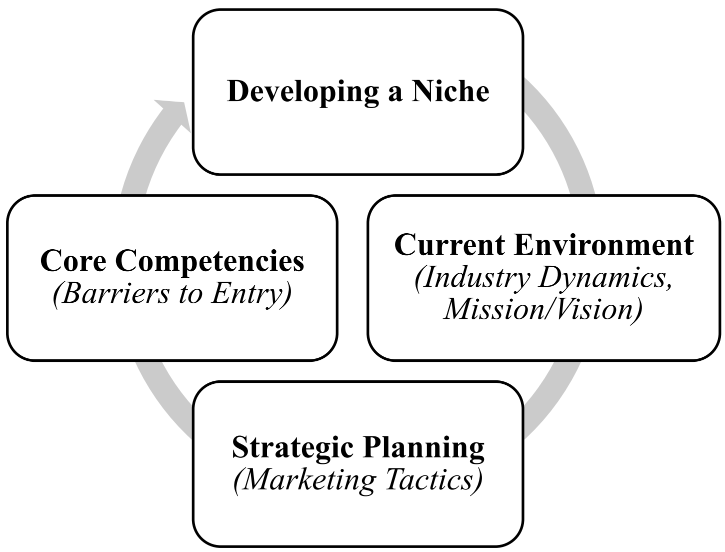

Figure 3. Niche market principles. From *Enterprise in Action: A Guide to Entrepreneurship* [Kindle version], by P. Lawrence, 2013, Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons. Retrieved from https://www.amazon.com. Reprinted with permission.

Industry dynamics differ greatly in the business environment depending on the type of product or the service niche of the business. Strategic niche management from the perspective of a manufacturing firm helps to identify certain parallels between a manufacturing firm and an institution of higher education. Sushandoyo and Magnusson (2014) mentioned that there will be certain tensions between a niche institution and a volume-oriented business. They pointed to how any new technology must account for market trends and projections. This perspective gives insight into how businesses approach changing a market to meet the current demand.

John Kokolus is the retired Founding Dean of the School of Continuing and Professional Studies at Elizabethtown College. Kokolus (2016) discussed the difference between developing a simple niche and the development of a mass niche. According to Kokolus, a simple niche promotes programmatic customization and limits the overall population that the initiative targets. Oftentimes, marketers can increase the price of the product due to its specialization and customization. Kokolus stated that a mass niche promotes greater efficiency, productivity, and thus profitability. The overall target population increases, and the increased demand can bring the overall cost of the product down based on simple supply and demand principles.

McKiernan and Purg (2014) approached their extensive research by working with 30 researchers and looking at 15 different countries to discuss what conclusions they could reach when determining how various businesses maintain their successful edge through embracing their niches. This research covered many cultures, political structures, social infrastructures, and innovations. The common themes in their study related to what successful business leaders do right. They summarized that successful business leaders need (a) willpower and ambitious goals, (b) discipline to inspire loyalty among employees, (c) to restrict outsourcing, (d) to decentralize within their structure, (e) to define markets precisely, (f) to focus on one thing and to do it right, (g) to capitalize on globalization, (h) to apply continuous innovation, and (i) to focus on the customer over the competitor. With information from the literature relating to what successful businesses and business leaders have done, researchers can unpack commonalities that may be useful in the higher education environment to help advance the niche market discussion.

Niche Markets in Higher Education

Niche market methods can help a college or university to differentiate itself from competing institutions. As Kokolus (2016) pointed out, “niche customer markets are created while niche business markets are found” (p. 1). With the changing population demographics, the need to innovate and to find new niche markets in higher education is essential to many universities’ survival efforts (Carey & Marcus, 2017). Drawing on research from the Council of Graduate Studies, Kokolus noted that mainstay programs such as Business and Education will actually have a decrease in graduate enrollment during this same period in time. This begs the question of where enrollment growth will take place. Ermler (2015) pointed out that enrollment growth will continue in specialized niche environments that focus on career development and advancement opportunities.

Dow (2008) focused on a national leadership grant from the Institute for Museum and Library Services and how five universities developed a system to provide a shared niche curriculum. Dow discussed the details of the administrative model the universities used, and Dow shared how this model of collaboration could enhance any niche market curriculum by a particular institution to meet the unmet needs of students. This research draws on the strength that emerges when institutions of higher education work on collaborative curriculum initiatives that forge new niche markets through innovative offerings. There are many benefits to institutional collaboration, as Figure 4 shows.

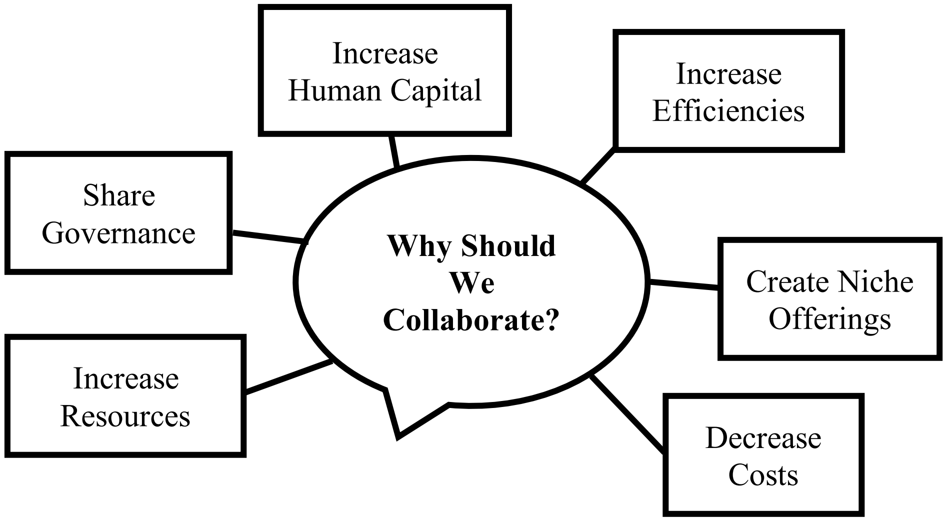

Figure 4. Benefits to collaboration. From "Successful Inter-Institutional Resource Sharing in a Niche Educational Market: Formal Collaboration Without a Contract," by E. H. Dow, 2008, *Innovative Higher Education, 33*(3), 169-179. doi:10.1007/s10755-008-9076-x. Reprinted with permission.

Williams van Rooij and Lemp (2010) developed ideas from both Ermler (2015) and Dow (2008) by analyzing 43 higher education e-learning certificate programs, and they determined how the institutions used these online sites to market themselves. The results of their study showed that institutions using graduate certificate programs are clear about who they are, the programs they offer, and the target audience towards whom their programs are tailored, thus *creating* a niche. However, the weakness Williams van Rooij and Lemp identified was that these institutions failed to identify a clear and unique benefit to the students through their marketing initiatives, because they focused on the traditional output model. This research reaffirms the value of correctly marketing a service niche by focusing on unique *benefits* that a student cannot find elsewhere (Vargo et al., 2008).

Kirp, Holman, Roberts, Solomon, and VanAntwerpen (2009) provided a cross-country tour of academia by looking at the most forceful trends in universities across the country. Their conclusions surrounding an increased focus in academia on the business values of efficiency, usefulness, and market forces that have begun to dictate a university's success emphasized the need for collaboration among the entire team, as Dow (2008) and McCully and McDaniel (2007) pointed out.

International Higher Education

Looking outside higher education in the United States, Liu-Farrer (2011) addressed international education and economic globalization. Liu-Farrer drew on how Chinese student migrants' employment experiences and mobility in Japan suggested that a natural niche had emerged among Japanese firms with business firms in China. These firms preferentially leaned towards recruiting Chinese students to fill these positions. Liu-Farrer helped to advance the topic of niche marketing by recognizing that marketers can create some niches naturally through active business and education collaboration. Recognizing that higher education can play an important role in the job market by offering hands-on experience to students is a key to student success.

The multiple case studies Kirp et al. (2009) discussed showed that even though change in higher education can oftentimes face resistance, the overall outcome can prove successful for economies through actively creating job placement opportunities for students. Weenink (2009) identified a growing trend among universities across the globe of introducing international elements to the curriculum. He introduced the study from the standpoint of one education system in the Netherlands that had been successful with *internationalizing* its curriculum. Weenink attempted to use this system to explain why the Dutch were correct in moving towards this new approach. While this strategy might work for non-English speaking markets, it is far more difficult to implement in the United States, where English is the predominant language, because finding a similar niche would require a lot of experimentation to determine which languages are going to create a successful niche.

Charter Schools – A Lesson in Niche Markets

Renzulli, Barr, and Paino (2015) looked at the current niche market of charter schools. They stated that charter schools were once innovative niche schools that are losing their niches. Looking at the various mission statements of this niche, Renzulli et al. found that over time, many charter schools had come to look much more like today's traditional schools, and thus their enrollments had declined. In other words, charter schools had begun to lose their niche. Renzulli et al. demonstrated a very important reality: a particular niche can erode over time if the institution suffers mission drift and lacks the valuable resources to maintain its niche. Working collaboratively with institutions in its peer group could lead to a continued path forward. Renzulli et al. correctly determined that specialization does not necessary support innovation or a long-term niche.

Liberal Arts as a Niche Market

Sheldon (2017) gave examples of why current liberal arts universities are poised to help to meet the challenge of providing the economy with well-rounded graduates. Honing in on Rochester Institute of Technology, St. John Fisher College, and SUNY Geneseo, Sheldon discussed how collaboration among local universities would hold the key to student success. She interviewed the various presidents of these universities and discovered a common theme that liberal arts paired with technology skills provides students the opportunity to develop critical thinking skills, problem-solving abilities, and an open way of thinking. Sheldon's research successfully ties into how collaborative program offerings can advance a market niche. The presidents of the respective universities all agreed that a university must stay nimble enough to adapt to the changing environment and look for collaborative ways to approach the changing job market.

Moving the narrative past the challenges of finding a niche market, and changing the dialogue from a budget deficit focus towards a focus on the overall student experience, student success, job placement, and collaboration, university administrators can start to build positive momentum (Dow, 2008; McCully & McDaniel, 2007). As Marion and Gonzales (2013) stated, "when led by transformational leaders, individuals were more likely to care about broader and deeper issues that may or may not be related to their personal gain" (p. 159). Transformational leaders will need to garnish trust among the team to work towards the necessary changes involved in finding a niche market (Freund, 2017).

Economic Factors

Marsa (2016) approached the topic of return on investment, more commonly referred to as *return on education*, in the higher education environment. She used case studies of current master's degree students who have found it necessary to get their terminal degree to stay competitive in the current job market. Marsa noted that the Bureau of Labor Statistics showed that jobs that require a master's degree or higher are experiencing high growth. Marsa further discussed the average student loan balance on graduation and she laid out a case that those loans are manageable given the job opportunities. Marsa further broke out the factors one should consider when plotting the path towards obtaining a terminal degree. Her research lays the foundation for why higher education will continue to be a necessary component towards gainful employment. It also furthers the research of Vargo et al. (2008) and the research of McCully and McDaniel (2007) by expressing a clear understanding of how explaining the benefits of a higher education and meeting the student's needs are necessary to continue to meet the new market demands.

Rohan and Boker (2011) of Ernst & Young discussed how higher education would increasingly operate like a consumer-driven market. As such, they discussed the five findings of their study: (a) the increased competition in higher education will put significant pressures on the current business models of established universities; (b) with student choice driving the market, Tier 2 universities will face continued pressure from Tier 1 universities; (c) universities will need to differentiate themselves clearly to succeed; (d) universities will have to adapt to using the marketing approaches of consumer-driven markets; and (e) universities facing the highest risk will have to consider restructuring, including merging and divesting. These ideas offer a parallel to the ability of higher education to adapt and reshape offerings to find and develop a niche market.

Many institutions of higher learning have additional concerns that can affect their cost structures and create fiscal crises (O'Connor, 1973). Numerous institutions operate in a union environment, and thus they have additional costs added to salaries and benefits on a yearly basis. There are times when these additional mandates go unfunded by the governing body that negotiates the salary increases (Russell, 1992). Taking a holistic approach to the situation makes it clear that one way to cover cost increases such as these is to increase revenue. Increasing revenue in a higher educational setting means increasing enrollment. The overall demographic on which universities rely to increase student enrollment is shrinking (Carey & Marcus, 2017). As Carey and Marcus (2017) noted, "the number of college and university students has dropped for five straight years, to about 18 million in the semester just ended, and no upswing is expected until 2023" (p. 1). Noting this fact, one could argue that the university should cut costs to cover the increase in expenses. This approach becomes a game of diminishing returns. Continuing to cut costs mean letting go of the very employees who service the university's mission of student success. The research shows that universities can reduce costs by finding collaborative ways to work with other institutions to reduce the cost burden (Cameron & Tschirhart, 1992). One such way to address rising costs is to look towards outsourcing back-end office or service functions (Cameron & Tschirhart, 1992). This business approach can be successful if the proposed contract is well vetted and it continues to serve students' needs at the same or a better service level then students expect.

Esack (2017) referred to a certain rural university as the fifth largest employer in the county; the university is responsible for generating over $100 million to the local economy. It is clear that many smaller rural economies rely heavily on the success of their universities. There are opportunities among the challenges. With the declining enrollment facing higher education, the days of relying solely on the traditional output model have passed, and universities should adapt and find their niches in a collaborative manner (Grawe, 2018; McCully & McDaniel, 2007; Vargo et al., 2008). As Vermeulen (2015) stated in the *Harvard Business Review*, when looking to compete in a homogeneous industry, one should focus on not trying to be attractive to everyone, eliminating all things that are superfluous to one's customer base, and replacing them with new offerings that are attractive.

The Rational Planning Model

Changing the niche market at a university/college could lead to programmatic changes. Thus, not all constituent groups will understand the vision. Kouzes and Posner (2011) developed this concept, stating, "people first follow the person, then the plan" (p. 75). Leading a change takes a new vision and a clear understanding to recognize where the various departmental processes break down (Vermeulen, 2015). It takes both shared and behavioral leadership to develop a successful niche market (Freund, 2017; McCully & McDaniel, 2007). Marion and Gonzales (2013) made the case that all the solutions to finding an institution's niche come from within the university's current resource base. One could argue that this is a correct statement and that the leadership of the university is in control of finding the niche. It is also the most appropriate group to do so. Thus, the university should identify a decision maker, so the rational planning model becomes relevant. Using the rational planning model of Marion and Gonzales (2013) would allow the management team to:

1. identify the problem that requires action;
2. analyze the problem, allowing for an understanding of the underlying dynamics;
3. brainstorm solutions to the problem;
4. analyze each possible solution;
5. choose a decision after an analysis of all the possibilities;
6. implement the decision.

Marion and Gonzales added, "the decision-making model reveals another assumption underlying early theories of organization, namely its closed systems perspective" (p. 17). One could argue that a university or college is a closed system environment, as many institutions are slow to adapt to new ideas to serve the market (McCully & McDaniel, 2007).

As the research of Liu-Farrer (2011) and Rohan and Boker (2011) suggested, universities can focus on many different initiatives to create a successful niche market. Creating a successful niche, while maintaining a forward-thinking vision, requires the administration to maintain trust while being courageous and nimble (McKiernan & Purg, 2014).

Conceptual Framework

Higher education has a reputation of adapting to change slowly, and many studies show a correlation to organizational change and senior leadership (Titterton, 2013). Referencing a 2013 study by the American Council on Education and the College and University Professional Association for Human Resources, Titterton (2013) reported that Stephanie Bell-Rose, a senior managing director and head of the TIAA-CREF Institute, had stated that diversity in a leader's background and thought process helps to create fresh perspectives and ideas. On the other hand, the business environment changes rapidly, and successful business leaders must keep pace in an effort to stay competitive (Chachra, 2014). The conceptual framework arranges a synthesis of topics that provide further insight into the perceptions of various niche market initiatives by university marketing decision makers through their lived experiences and the importance of increasing enrollment in higher education.

The traits successful business leaders possess can help to identify common attributes that can be useful in the higher education environment to help to develop a niche market. Combining the three leadership styles (supportive, participative, and achievement) in behavioral theory with the principles of successful businesses shows a clear path towards incorporating these styles and traits into the shared leadership theory (Freund, 2017). As Freund (2017) stated, "shared leadership is associated with multiple aspects of team effectiveness, including productively, team satisfaction, and decision quality" (p. 16).

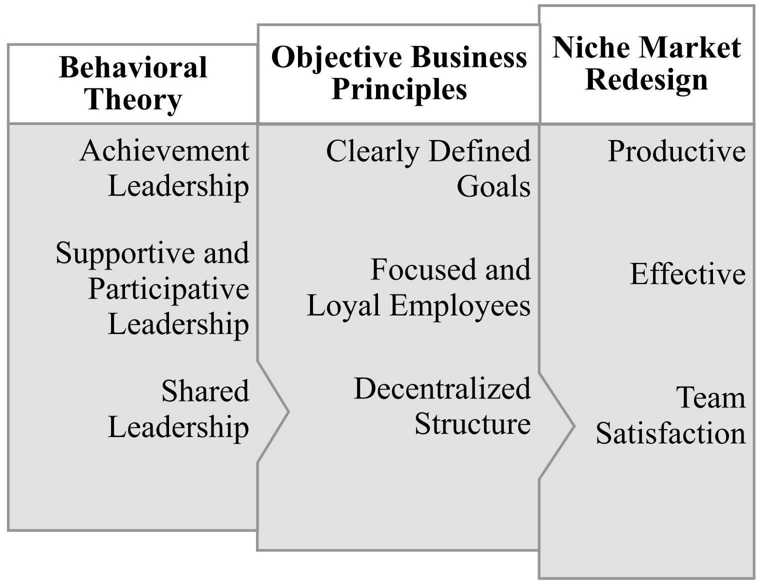

Figure 5. Theory intersects with principles in business niche markets. From "Shared Leadership: Research and Implications for Nonprofit Leadership, Capacity Building, and Education," by M. Freund, 2017, *Journal of Nonprofit Education and Leadership, 7*(1), 13-23. Reprinted with permission.

Balancing the behavioral leadership styles becomes key to implementing shared leadership successfully. Freund (2017) showed that exercising shared leadership builds a trusting foundation for an organization to have a shared purpose with a team that feels empowered.

As Freund (2017) explained, the concept of shared leadership arises from the need to navigate the complex pressures in traditional bureaucratic organizational structures. Using these structures to develop a more inclusive, collaborative organization may lead to more successful niche market initiatives. A typical higher educational structure involves a president, vice presidents, deans, faculty, directors, and staff. There is a clear bureaucratic hierarchy. As Freund stated, shared leadership revolves around the concept of delegating decision making down the organizational hierarchy using the autonomy of the team. Managers who recognize and who are willing to let go of complete control of authority, decision-making, and accountability and who turn the focus more towards collaboration and input from the team can accomplish shared leadership (Freund, 2017). Freund further discussed how the traditional leadership model with a single leader fails to address the complex, multifaceted need for collaboration among the team. The concept of collaboration is also evident in McKiernan and Purg's (2014) research, in which they noted that successful organizations have decentralized authority.

Many newer business organizations have taken a more inclusive approach to leadership, and as such, they have built a deeper bench of employees who engage with internal and external constituents on a deeper level (Freund, 2017). This concept is key to identifying a successful niche market, because as Kokolus (2016) pointed out, marketers must create customer niche markets, and engaging constituents is a first step in identifying an unmet need. Because of this new perspective on leadership, the older, more bureaucratic framework is struggling to meet the relationship needs of the changing environment. As Rohan and Boker (2011) suggested, universities will need to differentiate themselves to succeed. Using a project management approach to leadership involves a dramatic change in the types of relationships and the authority style most bureaucratic structures, such as universities, use (Freund, 2017). These theories can help to guide the process of making an organization more inclusive, and thus working towards creating a successful niche market in an institution of higher education.

Summary

Foster et al. (2018), developing the work of Sheldon (2017), suggested creating a niche in higher education using innovative ideas from the business environment as one way for universities to scale themselves, allowing tailored educational offerings to meet the fast-changing demands of the student. Marrone and Kolbe (2010) suggested that pairing technology with the skills of problem solving from a liberal arts setting allows for a well-rounded student. Kirp et al. (2009) stated that an institution of higher education can strive to increase student success by collaborating with businesses to foster internships that increase students' ability to find jobs by allowing exposure to critical hands-on experience. Introducing students to collaborative curriculum pathways while still in high school not only helps the students to find their passions at an earlier age, but it also helps the institution to foster a relationship with the students before they enroll full time at the university (Heileman, Abdallah, Slim, & Hickman, 2018). Relationship building of this nature may help to increase student matriculation by introducing students to the expectations of a higher educational setting sooner, and thus improving their chances of graduation.

Looking directly at traditional liberal arts universities and examining how these universities can find profit centers to address the fiscal challenges they face in today's marketplace leads the researcher to draw parallels with business marketing, with a focus on creating a niche that has some level of back office collaboration (Sheldon, 2017). Tying together the observations of Kirp (2013) and the timely research of Ermler (2015), the researcher focused on the areas where there is potential growth in higher education. Looking at the educational system as a whole can help higher education staff to focus on collaborations with other schools in their area to strengthen the overall educational environment, and thus to focus on long-term student success and current trends (Liu-Farrer, 2011).

The key leadership qualities/themes that emerged from the literature review were developing and maintaining trust, acknowledging needs of followers, ability to develop a clear mission/vision, and expanding relationships through action. Marion and Gonzales (2013) further emphasized these key qualities as they stated that an awareness of successful leadership qualities is necessary to influence such a large change at an institution of higher education.

The researcher has considered the enrollment issues and the budgetary constraints facing higher education. This is where what Marion and Gonzales (2013) refer to as the rational planning model can further the research. This model can help researchers to identify the problem that requires action, analyze the problem, allowing for an understanding of the underlying dynamics, brainstorm solutions to the problem, analyze each possible solution, choose a decision after analyzing all the possibilities, and finally, implement the decision (Marion & Gonzales, 2013). Institutions of higher learning must become nimble enough to adjust their curricula to the ever-changing demands of the job market (McKiernan & Purg, 2014). As Ermler (2015) stated, the shelf life in higher education is now short.

The literature review has focused on some of the niche principles in business and the leadership styles that predominate in this environment; yet, there is a gap in the research relating to the various niche market initiatives university marketing decision makers in higher education use. Chapter 3 presents the methodology of this phenomenological case study. The researcher aimed to gain further insight into the perceptions of various niche market initiatives by university marketing decision makers through exploring their lived experiences of niche marketing.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative, phenomenological study examined the perceptions of select niche market initiatives by university marketing decision makers through their lived experiences of niche marketing. It examined the perceptions of these leaders through specific strategies they used and their perceptions of how effective the initiatives were in increasing enrollment. Exploring the traits successful business leaders possess, and the niche market principles business leaders use, helped to identify common attributes that are transferrable to the higher education environment to help to develop a niche market.

As Freund (2017) explained, the concept of shared leadership arises from the need to navigate the complex pressures in traditional bureaucratic organizational structures. Turning these structures into a more inclusive collaborative organization may lead to a more successful niche market initiative. There is a clear bureaucratic hierarchy in many institutions of higher education. As Freund stated, shared leadership revolves around the concept of delegating decision making down the organizational hierarchy using the autonomy of the team. Managers who recognize and who are willing to let go of complete control of authority, decision-making, and accountability and who turn the focus more towards collaboration and input from the team can accomplish shared leadership (Freund, 2017). Freund further discussed how the traditional leadership model with a single leader fails to address the complex, multifaceted need for collaboration among the team. The concept of collaboration is also evident in McKiernan and Purg's (2014) research, as they noted that successful organizations have decentralized authority.

The marketing environment continues to change and evolve as consumer behaviors produce new consumer wants and needs (Goldsmith & Moutinho, 2017). Even though consumer wants and needs change throughout time, the marketing concept Lamb et al. (2012) discussed suggests that management's primary focus should be on consumer satisfaction. In an educational setting, consumer satisfaction means meeting students' wants and needs.

According to Goldsmith and Moutinho (2017), there is a consistent theme from marketing consulting firms that, "all types must adapt their strategies to the new realities of a changing marketplace in which consumers are enabled by technology to consume differently than in the past" (p. 37). According to Google (2016), 53% of teens between the ages of 13 and 17 usually make purchases using their smartphones. Fromm and Read (2018) reinforced this result, stating, "if Pivotals have to whip out their laptop to interact with your brand online, you're going to lose them" (p. 52). In the aforementioned context, Fromm and Read referred to Generation Z as Pivotals. McKinsey and Company (2015) stated that the second most noticeable trend change in marketing is the Internet of Things (IoT). The new use of physical devices across the Internet is allowing marketing managers access to data on the whole value chain (Goldsmith & Moutinho, 2017).

Higher education has a reputation of adapting to change slowly, and many studies show a correlation to organizational change and senior leadership (Titterton, 2013). This phenomenological study examined the marketing initiatives higher education marketing leaders use and their perceptions of how niche market initiatives help to increase student enrollment.

As higher education continues to face declining enrollment and the financial pressures from decreased funding, colleges and universities must find innovative ways to differentiate themselves from competing institutions through niche market initiatives. This research study used interviews to document leaders' insights into the perceptions of the effectiveness of various niche market initiatives university marketing decision makers used.

Research Questions

This qualitative, phenomenological study began with the following research questions:

1. What are the lived experiences of marketing leaders in higher education in the state of Pennsylvania?
2. What strategies and initiatives do higher education marketing leaders perceive as effective?
3. How do higher education marketing leaders perceive the effect of the university's culture on marketing initiatives?

Setting

The setting for this study was various public and private institutions of higher education across Pennsylvania, with participants who are leading various marketing initiatives in their respective university settings. As Grawe (2018) showed, this area of the United States is likely to have tremendous enrollment declines in higher education. The marketing model for higher education is shifting away from the traditional output of the organization to a *value-creation* model, in which the *benefit* the customer experiences is the new value (Vargo et al., 2008). From this standpoint, goods and services facilitate the creation of value the consumer perceives. This multiple case study focused on the major themes that emerged from the participants' various responses.

Sample Participants

The researcher selected nine participants through a combination of recruitment and networking (Creswell, 2015). Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested that qualitative researchers sample until the point of redundancy, when new participants yield no new information. Given the practical limitations on time and funding for this study, the researcher interviewed participants who were within driving distance and, when possible, used the Zoom video conferencing technology platform. After making initial contact via phone, e-mail, or both, the researcher e-mailed participants an electronic qualifying questionnaire using the Research Electronic Data Capture (REDCap) platform. A recruitment e-mail went out with a link to the survey. The survey landing page had informed consent information for participants to read and agree to before continuing. After completing the informed consent, participants completed the qualifying questionnaire electronically (Appendix A). The researcher selected the nine participants because they agreed to a more in-depth 40-to-60-minute conversation to explore the questions on the questionnaire (Appendix B). The researcher allowed the interview content to be as emergent as necessary to gain reasonable coverage of the stakeholders' perceptions and interests (Patton, 2002). The number of interviews reflects the goal to reach a point of saturation, and the researcher continued interviews until he reached the point of diminishing returns (Patton, 2002).

The Role of the Researcher, Bias, and Ethical Concerns

The researcher has held various administrative positions at two universities. In these administrative capacities, the researcher met regularly with the local faculty, staff, and students. The researcher has neither the supervisory nor evaluative power to force changes at any of the institutions represented in the study. Due to recognition of local financial constraints, the researcher experienced an increased sense of urgency to address the declining enrollment issues facing higher education more generally. Therefore, the researcher was interested in exploring how university marketing team leaders perceive the effectiveness of niche marketing initiatives on higher education and the perceived effect on student enrollment. While the researcher has been observing his campus climate and the various interactions among its constituents, he obtained the historical, financial, and economic information that informs this case study through various methods available to the general public.

Research Design

The phenomenological approach to this case study allowed the researcher to unpack the dimensions of human involvement to help to express common experiences from a group of individuals who share the same circumstances (Daniels, 2005). The researcher followed what Moustakas (1994) described as the steps to an empirical phenomenological study:

1. The researcher develops a set of questions and immerses himself in the data, which requires reading the interview transcripts several times.
2. The researcher then breaks down the transcripts' statements into relevant themes that relate to the phenomenon.
3. The researcher then uses the themes to develop an exhaustive description of the participants' experiences of the phenomenon.

As Daniels (2005) described, one characteristic of an empirical phenomenological study is that there is an emphasis on the commonality between the various, diverse appearances of the phenomenon.

Using the EMSI database, the researcher developed a list of higher education institutions in Pennsylvania. The researcher accessed their respective websites to locate the person in charge of marketing. The researcher sent marketing leaders invitations to participate in the study. Using the qualifying questionnaire, the researcher selected participants who agreed to a face-to-face interview. The researcher sought a population pool of between eight and 15 university marketing leaders who agreed to an interview.

The researcher searched for the commonality between the participants' lived experiences, structuring the study around the common themes he identified through the coding process. The researcher focused more on the rigor of this collection approach by attempting to avoid creative bias from personal experience.

The researcher attempted to get a large enough pool of applicants through the invitation process to uncover any subgroup(s) that clustered around a particular theme. This phenomenological approach to the study received much consideration by the researcher when determining the best way to collect data from the participants.

Data Collection Methods

The researcher set out to solicit between eight to 15 participants who have experienced the phenomenon under study through a combination of recruitment and networking (Creswell, 2015). The researcher sent a recruitment e-mail with a link to the qualifying survey to higher education marketing leaders located in Pennsylvania, explaining the purpose of the study. The survey landing page had informed consent information for the participants to read and agree to before continuing. After completing the informed consent form, the participants completed a short questionnaire electronically (Appendix A). The researcher began the interview process with those who stated they would be willing to be interviewed for 40-60 minutes in the final question on the survey (Appendix A). This phenomenological study involved only the selected participants; however, the findings of this study could provide other marketing leaders in higher education with a greater understanding of the marketing principles effective marketing leaders in the higher education environment use.

The researcher developed a semi-structured interview questionnaire (Appendix B). As Leedy and Ormrod (2010) identified, a semi-structured interview questionnaire is most useful to capture the meaningful information in a phenomenological study. The semi-structured questionnaire included both demographic and perceptual data, as Table 1 shows.

Table 1

Collection of Demographic and Perceptual Data

Demographic Data
a) What is your title? b) How many direct reports do you manage? c) What is your institution's Carnegie classification? d) What is the approximate size of your marketing department budget? What is the approximate size of the overall university budget? e) How long (in years) have you been leading a marketing effort at an institution of higher education? f) Approximately how many students were enrolled at your institution when you began leading the market effort? g) Approximately how many students are enrolled at your institution today? h) How many years have you worked in higher education? What is your career and educational background?
Perceptual Data
Leadership and Culture a) Please describe what you do at your university. b) What challenges do you perceive in your current marketing environment? c) What leadership characteristics and practices do you believe are necessary to lead a marketing initiative at your institution? d) What leadership behaviors should someone in your position avoid? e) What economic factors do you perceive affect your ability to market the university? f) What university cultural factors do you perceive affect marketing at the institution? Demographic g) How many years have you worked in higher education? What is your career and educational background?

h) What is the approximate size of your marketing department budget? What is the approximate size of the overall university budget?

i) How long (in years) have you been leading the marketing effort at an institution of higher education?

j) Approximately how many students were enrolled at your institution when you began leading the marketing effort?

k) Approximately how many students are enrolled at your institution today?

l) How do you perceive demographic factors affecting your marketing initiatives?

Technology

m) Describe the level and type of technological expertise you think is necessary to lead a marketing initiative at your institution.

n) How do you use technology such as data analytics to aid in various marketing initiatives?

o) How do you use forecasting or modeling to predict behavior?

p) What tools do you use to measure a successful marketing initiative?

q) What examples of data or evidence do you have on the effectiveness of your marketing strategies?

Marketing

r) What is your definition of niche marketing?

s) What does the process for determining a marketing initiative look like? Can you walk me through the decision making process and who would be involved?

t) Have there been deliberate efforts to improve enrollments through marketing initiatives here?

u) Has the process always worked like this? If marketing initiatives have changed, can you tell me when that happened and how it went?

v) Do you find that consumer behavior has changed, and if so how?

w) What meaning does the story hold in the marketing environment?

x) Briefly describe or give examples of marketing initiatives currently under way at your institution.

y) How do you perceive the effect of marketing strategies on enrollment at your institution?

z) Do you have any sample marketing material of which you are particularly proud? May I have a copy?

aa) Do you have any additional information would you like to share about your marketing strategies and initiatives?

bb) Would it be okay for me to call or e-mail you if I have additional questions as the study progresses?

Qualifying Questionnaire

The researcher asked the participants their professional titles, the number of direct reports they oversee, the institution's Carnegie classification, and whether they would be willing to engage in a 40-60 minute interview. The researcher used REDCap as a survey tool. The qualifying questionnaire helped the researcher to identify participants who were willing to engage in more in-depth interviews (Appendix B). REDCap is a web-based application that supports secure data capture for researchers. The researcher selected the participants who agreed to be interviewed to participate in an audio recording of a more in-depth semi-structured interview, as Creswell (2013) suggested.

Semi-structured Interviews

The researcher conducted all the participant interviews. The interview sessions took place in person or via the Zoom video conferencing technology platform. According to Simon (2006), a phenomenological study includes an interview process, written discussions, personal observations, and digital transcripts that relate to the phenomenon being studied. The researcher engaged in a reflective journaling process before each interview to document and expose any potential bias. The semi-structured interview process allowed the researcher to expand on the proposed interview questions, and it allowed the researcher to probe further into the rationale for various responses. The researcher informed each participant at the beginning of the interview that he would record and transcribe the interview.

The researcher used member checks (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) to support the validity of the research study. The member check strategy involved the researcher e-mailing the participant a copy of the transcript of his or her interview. The researcher asked the participant in the e-mail to make any changes or additions to the transcript and to e-mail the revised document back. The researcher gave participants his contact information. In certain instances, the researcher made contact with the participants for additional information as emerging themes arose as a result of the coding process.|

Data Analysis and Synthesis

As Liu-Farrer (2011) and Rohan and Boker (2011) suggested, a university can focus on many different initiatives to create a successful niche market. This case study focused on the main themes that came out of the coding of the semi-structured questionnaire and the interview transcripts. Smith, Flower, and Larkin (2009) discussed interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) as a method that focuses on a set of common processes and principles that help the researcher to gain an understanding of each participant's point of view. Smith et al. further stated that the interpretative analysis moves from the descriptive to the interpretive and from the particular to the shared. Smith et al. discussed that the IPA process involves searching for themes in the first interview transcript, connecting the identified themes, and analyzing the other cases. Smith et al. developed IPA data analysis by developing the following six step method:

1. reading and re-reading transcripts;
2. initial coding and notating;
3. developing emergent themes;
4. searching for connections across emergent themes;
5. moving to the next case;
6. looking for patterns across cases.

As Creswell (2013) stated, interpretation of qualitative data requires extracting meaning from the overall themes. The researcher utilized Smith et al.'s (2009) six step method to accomplish a robust interpretation of the data from the study participants.

Data Collection and Transcription

The researcher began the analysis by taking a full inventory of all the data points he collected throughout this process. These data included questionnaire responses, journal entries and notes, relevant literature, and interview transcripts and recordings. Once the researcher had completed a full inventory, the coding process began, with the researcher utilizing NVivo 12 Pro qualitative research software. The researcher read each transcript a minimum of three times before loading it into NVivo 12 to begin the precoding process. The precoding process began by identifying significant statements (Saldaña, 2012). Using the significant statements, the researcher organized the data by first focusing on the three areas of culture, lived experiences, and strategies and initiatives. As Saldaña (2012) stated, researchers can characterize coding patterns by similarities, differences, frequency, sequence, correspondence, and causation. The coding patterns aided the researcher by identifying common themes. The researcher coded the questionnaires to maintain the participants' right to confidentiality by assigning them pseudonyms.

The researcher conducted the interviews after the study participants completed the qualifying questionnaire. The researcher selected participants who agreed to a 40-60 minute interview to participant in the interview process. The researcher recorded the audio of the interviews with each participant's permission. Immediately following the interview, the researcher created field notes of the details he observed and the researcher's significant impressions of the interview. The researcher transcribed the recording of each audio interview so that he could use the text version of the transcript for analysis. The researcher used member checks to support the validity of the research study.

Data Coding

To code the data, the researcher read through the interview transcripts and field notes to highlight and annotate all areas that spoke to the research questions. The researcher then collected the annotations and organized them with labels that corresponded to various themes. According to Patton (2002), the researcher should ensure internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity of the themes. Internal homogeneity is the concept that the data in a single theme or category all speak to the same theme (Patton, 2002). External heterogeneity is the concept that there is no overlap in the themes (Patton, 2002).

Semi-structured Interviews

The conceptual framework provided the following set of preliminary codes for consideration: market forecasting, needs and motivations, brand share, product and price optimization, marketing mix, customer dynamics, science, substance, story, speed, and simplicity.

The researcher used Express Scribe to record and transcribe the interviews. Once the *in vivo* coding of the questionnaires was complete, the researcher grouped together common themes that arose from the responses of the participants' interview transcripts. The researcher broke down the semi-structured interview into the following question groupings: leadership and culture, demographic, technology, and marketing. By grouping the responses into common themes, the researcher narrowed the data into units that are relevant and that inform the conceptual framework and the research questions. The researcher asked the study participants to share any artifacts that they were particularly proud of or deemed relevant. Artifacts included marketing materials, media-related pieces, a matrix, questionnaires, admission packages, digital images, and website addresses. By using triangulation (Creswell, 2015), the researcher was able to corroborate evidence from various individuals through the use of the qualifying questionnaire, the interview transcripts, and the selected artifacts to describe themes from the qualitative research.

Pilot Testing

As Johnson and Christensen (2014) suggested, the researcher pilot tested the questionnaire and the interview questions to determine whether the interview protocol was operating correctly. Pilot testing the questionnaire and interview questions allowed the researcher to reword and reformat any questions that yielded unnecessary or useless information before utilizing the instruments in the study environment. The researcher sat down face to face with a selected vice president familiar with qualitative research. The researcher went through the questionnaire and interview questions step by step to garnish any necessary feedback and to make the necessary changes to the questions prior to conducting the study.

Participant Rights

Participation in this qualitative, phenomenological study was voluntary. The researcher required the participants to give informed consent before the questionnaire began or the interview took place. An initial e-mail with the survey link was accompanied by an e-mail that explained the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of the participation, and informed consent, and that included a request for participation. The researcher kept all the information for this study confidential on a password-protected laptop, which he securely backed up on a daily basis. The researcher kept any and all documents or artifacts in a locked file drawer that only he had the key to unlock. The researcher will destroy all the information he obtained during the course of this study 3 years after the completion of the doctoral process. In an effort to ensure a transparent and accurate collection of the data, the researcher utilized member checking. Member checking involved the researcher e-mailing each participant a copy of his or her transcript of the interview. The participant had the opportunity to make any edits to the transcripts to ensure accuracy.

Limitations and Delimitations of the Study

Even though the researcher took the necessary steps to limit bias, there was a potential for bias due to the various roles the researcher has held in the higher education environment. Since this study required data analysis, the researcher must be aware of the potential for subjectivity and bias (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). The researcher attempted to overcome this potential bias by ensuring that the transcribed interview document clearly articulated and reflected the participants' responses. The researcher engaged in a reflective journaling process before each interview to document and expose any potential bias.

The feedback from the participants limited the study; thus, the accuracy of the participant's accounts of the effectiveness of the marketing efforts also limited the study. The researcher delimited the study to higher education institutions in the state of Pennsylvania. Thus, the study does not represent all higher education leaders engaged in marketing initiatives at their respective universities. The researcher asked participants to complete the questionnaire on a voluntary basis; therefore, non-respondents limited the size of the final sample of participants.

Summary

Chapter 3 has discussed the qualitative, phenomenological research methodology the researcher used to gain further insight into the perceptions of various niche market initiatives by university marketing decision makers. Exploring the perceptions of the marketing leaders on how university niche marketing initiatives succeed helps to determine the themes of successful marketing initiatives in higher education that help to increase student enrollment. As Merriam and Tisdell (2015) suggested, a researcher must take four essential measures when conducting research: (a) obtain informed consent, (b) maintain the participant's confidentiality, (c) know which information is public and/or private, and (d) debrief the participants. This chapter has outlined each of these four measures.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

The marketing environment continues to change as consumer behaviors evolve and reflect new consumer wants and needs (Goldsmith & Moutinho, 2017). This study revealed how higher education marketing leaders perceive the effectiveness of their marketing strategies via the use of technology and data-enabled strategies as a viable enrollment growth-strategy. Furthermore, the researcher discovered how a customized program or demographic marketing approach can add value to the students' experience and respond to unmet needs of prospective students. This approach starts by leveraging technology and data, niche marketing strategies, and innovative leadership. Examining the perceptions of niche market initiatives of various higher education marketing decision makers allowed the researcher to shed light on how they perceive these initiatives in an effort to increase student enrollment.

The goal of this study was to illustrate the lived experiences of marketing leaders in the higher education space in light of the increased competition faced by colleges and universities, and the need to identify the uniqueness of a university due to the shifting trends in marketing. This is an important area of study given the extreme financial strain facing higher education institutions generally and the ever-present demographic shifts.

Because there were few studies that depicted the lived experiences of higher education marketing leaders, this qualitative, phenomenological study provides insight into the perceptions of various niche market initiatives by university marketing decision makers. The following research questions guided this study:

1. What are the lived experiences of marketing leaders in higher education in the state of Pennsylvania?

2. What strategies and initiatives do higher education marketing leaders perceive as effective?
3. How do higher education marketing leaders perceive the effect of the university's culture on marketing initiatives?

This chapter has three sections. The first section gives an overview of the data collection and analysis. The second section provides an overview of the participants and the demographic data related to the participants. Gathering the demographic information and the additional summary narrative for each participant through the immersive interviews allowed the researcher to obtain a deeper understanding of the participants' lived experiences. The third section explores the themes and subthemes that arose from the participants' lived experiences.

Data Collection and Analysis Overview

The process of data collection began after the researcher received permission from the University of New England's Institutional Review Board. The researcher started the process by sending out an e-mail to 19 marketing leaders across the state of Pennsylvania explaining the purpose of the study and asking for voluntary participation. Of the 19 potential participants, eight never responded, two declined to participate, and nine replied that they would be willing to participate. These nine marketing leaders then received the consent form and the qualifying questionnaire via the REDCap survey tool.

The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews in person with the nine participants on an individual basis. Of the nine interviews, three were face to face at a location of the participant's choosing, and six took place via Zoom. Each interview lasted between 35 and 58 minutes. The use of a semi-structured protocol allowed the investigator to ask open-ended questions. The researcher unpacked the phenomenological interview in parts that covered the questions to answer the three overarching study questions. The 28 structured questions were organized into four categories: leadership and culture, demographics, technology, and marketing. In the first part, the researcher gathered data on the focused life and history of the participants' lived experiences in higher education. In the second part, the researcher gathered details of the participants' experiences. Finally, the researcher reflected upon the meaning of the participants' lived experiences and he aligned the data with the research questions. The researcher audio recorded the interviews after each participant gave consent to record. The researcher used both the Rev transcription technology platform and Express Scribe transcription software to transcribe the interviews. The researcher reviewed the transcripts and sent a draft copy to the participants via e-mail for member checking to ensure and confirm that the transcript was accurate (Creswell, 2003). Three participants verified that the transcripts were correct, five participants returned the transcripts with minor edits, and one participant did not return the transcript. The researcher felt confident that data saturation had occurred by the ninth interview, when the knowledge it produced was the same as the information from previous interviews (Merriam, 2009). Seven of the nine participants shared marketing artifacts of which they were particularly proud or cared to share, which helped to achieve triangulation. In addition to the artifacts, spacing the interviews to yield a further understanding from any patterns or inconsistencies in the data from the multiple participants helped with triangulation (Merriam, 2009). The researcher assigned pseudonyms to the participants and he changed identifiable information such as institution names to protect the participants' privacy. The researcher ensured the confidentiality of the direct quotes and stories of the participants by removing any details that would allow others to identify the individuals' identities.

Data analysis followed Smith and Osborn's (2009) six step method: reading and re-reading transcripts, initial coding and noting, developing emergent themes, searching for connections across emergent themes, moving to the next case, and looking for patterns across cases. The researcher completed coding by utilizing NVivo 12 Pro qualitative research software. The researcher read each transcript a minimum of three times before loading it into NVivo 12 to begin the precoding process. The precoding process began by identifying significant statements (Saldaña, 2012). Using the significant statements, the researcher organized data by first focusing on the three areas of culture, lived experiences, and strategies and initiatives. By gathering demographic information and the additional narratives of the participants, the researcher acquired a greater understanding of the participants' lived experiences as marketing leaders in higher education.

Overview of Participants

The participants shared their perceptions about marketing in the higher education setting in the state of Pennsylvania. Each of the participants defined niche marketing in his or her own terms, but central to each definition was the idea of a niche program or demographic population. The participants also had a shared understanding of the importance of data and data analytics to the marketing decisions the institution makes. Each study participant had a clear view of the challenges surrounding the demographic decline in the state of Pennsylvania and the significance of that phenomenon on the budget. Many of the participants discussed collaboration as a way to improve marketing initiatives, and each participant shared how his or her institution's culture and story play a role in the marketing environment.

Each participant in this study leads the marketing initiatives for his or her respective institution. The study participants' job titles, time spent in higher education, the number of direct reports, the number of staff in the department, and their institutions' Carnegie classifications are in Table 2:

Table 2

Study Participant Overview

Participant	Job Title	Higher Education Experience (Years)	Number of Direct Reports	Size of Department Staff	Institution's Carnegie Classification
A	Vice President	> 1	6-9	6-9	Master's
B	Director	~ 20	3-5	3-5	Master's
C	Director	~ 13	0-2	6-9	Not Classified
D	Associate Vice President	~ 12	6-9	6-9	Doctorate
E	Vice President	~ 12	6-9	10+	Doctorate
F	Assistant Vice President	~ 7	3-5	6-9	Doctorate
G	Director	~ 10	3-5	10+	Baccalaureate
H	Chief	~ 30	3-5	10+	Master's
I	Vice President	~ 23	6-9	10+	Doctorate

The data in Table 2 show that the study participants work at a broad range of institutions classified from doctorate to baccalaureate-granting. The participant interviews uncovered that the institutions had varying levels of enrollment and that they experienced different enrollment trends at their respective institutions. Further research by the College Scorecard determined that they were both public and private institutions, with undergraduate enrollments of approximately 700 to 8,300 students (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.).

The participants have varying backgrounds and they have worked in higher education for as little as 1 year and as long as 30 years. Looking at the study participant population as a whole, the average participant has been in the higher education setting for about 14 years. Four participants reported having a department staff of between six and nine people, and four other participants discussed having a department with 10 or more people. Only one study participant reported having a staff of three to five people. The next section introduces a summary of the study participants' lived experiences as marketing leaders in institutions of higher education in the state of Pennsylvania.

Participant A

Participant A is rather new to the higher education environment, having spent the majority of his career in a corporate marketing environment in various capacities. The participant holds a bachelor's degree and works as a vice president at a small private master's degree-granting institution. Enrollment has remained steady over the last few years. The participant discussed being in a highly competitive marketplace with a shrinking number of high-school graduates and therefore having "to think differently about" various subpopulations. Even though the marketing office was less than 10 years old, the institution has been using data analytics for quite some time, and the participant discussed how those tools helped to pinpoint the students towards whom they intend to market. The participant described having success with marketing initiatives. Using the data tools to market towards specific audiences resulted in a huge increase in the number of inquiries about specific niche programs. This participant shared that being a strong communicator who helps people to understand the overall strategic direction for the institution was a key leadership characteristic that someone in his position should possess. Participant A preferred to lead with an inclusive approach by allowing everyone to have a voice in the decision-making process. This participant's perception was that marketing initiatives at the institution had failed in the past because the initiative lacked the necessary buy-in from the internal constituents: "if we didn't have a clear understanding of the end goal as well as the expectations of the client, then the project failed." In an effort to avoid repeating the past, this participant discussed how it was important for him to be able to explain to the stakeholders how they can work together on the solutions necessary to reach the intended audience.

Participant B

Participant B has been in the higher education environment for about 20 years. The participant has a career background in both information technology and marketing. The participant holds a bachelor's degree with additional certifications. The participant is employed as a director of a small, public, master's-granting institution. Enrollment has steadily declined over the last 5 years at the institution. The participant mentioned how the declining enrollment has really hampered the overall university budget. As a result of a shrinking budget, the director discussed how using technology to aid in analytics has helped in targeting marketing efforts with fewer financial resources. According to the participant, changing leadership over the last several years has hindered the institution. The participant discussed her experience with a change in leadership and how the institution experienced a change in the overall mission and vision of the institution during the leadership transition. The participant further discussed the drawbacks the institution encountered as a result of changing the marketing direction, and how that change has affected enrollment. When discussing challenges, the participant discussed the competitive landscape in Pennsylvania due to the decreasing number of high-school graduates and explained how, in this competitive space, it was important to have group buy-in to avoid pushback from the various constituents on campus. The participant shared various digital marketing initiatives by pulling them up on a cellphone. These artifacts included digital ad campaigns targeting specific programs as well as overall branding materials for high-school graduates. The participant mentioned multiple times how all the marketing efforts are now focused on growing enrollment and how the use of data analytics allows for the assessment of each marketing effort to determine success based on actual data. From the participant's perspective, the evidence suggests that these targeted marketing initiatives are showing successful results, as the institution's visibility has increased over the last year.

Participant C

Participant C has worked in the higher education environment for over 10 years at a master's-granting institution in a director role. The participant holds a master's degree. The participant spoke about cultural buy-in and how that buy-in will help to move the institution towards reaching more potential students. After discussing the declining demographics in the state, the participant was very passionate about reaching working people or nontraditional students. The participant discussed specific examples of marketing initiatives, pointing to them online. The participant shared a social media schedule and some print material, and researcher and participant discussed where to locate other online media the participant was particularly proud to display. After reviewing the marketing initiatives of which the participant was most proud, it was clear that they sent a specific brand message to potential students. The participant discussed how the institution was beginning to look past just using social media to using data analytics to look at the broader demographic population.

Participant D

Participant D has worked in the higher education environment for about 12 years in various capacities with increasing responsibilities. The participant works at a doctoral-granting public institution as an associate vice president. The participant explained how the institution has invested heavily in marketing and rebranding over the last 2 years. The participant spoke about the declining demographic of high-school students and how important it is to reach the audience: “there are so many colleges and universities that are vying for very much the same student [that] it’s clearly a different environment than 10 years ago.” The participant stated that the marketing efforts are finally paying off, as the institution is welcoming its largest freshman class in the last several years. The participant shared a great deal about how the marketing team uses the data analytics and dashboards of various analytical tools. The enrollment for the institution has been declining slightly over the last few years as a result of larger graduating classes. The institution has been using data analytics for the last few years, and it is moving past just using data analytics. The team is now experimenting with various sample audiences tied to the analytics of certain marketing campaigns to sample test the audiences’ response. The participant had a strong focus on data and how to use that data to make marketing decisions. When discussing leadership, the participant shared how being patient and listening had helped him to become more of a “solutions provider.” The institution benchmarks its marketing efforts against key performance indexes (KPIs). The participant shared how the institution measures its marketing efforts and how the team is flexible and adaptable based on what it has learned from the data and from planned postmortem sessions: “leading that effort certainly requires a high amount of buy-in.” Further discussing buy-in, the participant shared that when and where change was necessary it was necessary to have the support and buy-in at the top of the organization to help to share a consistent message with the various constituencies. The participant shared print artifacts that showed how the team worked to “socialize” the brand within the campus community. The participant continued to speak about the artifacts and to share that these efforts are working and they are “resonating with our audience: our tactics are driving intended traffic.” When asked how to foster that level of support or buy-in, the participant shared that “it is through a lot of inclusivity” by including people throughout the entire process and by asking for recommendations from the entire team, whether it be via a town hall session or another feedback mechanism.

Participant E

Participant E has worked in the higher education environment for about 30 years. Participant E spoke a great deal about the declining demographics and how that is putting the institution in a difficult place when it comes to messaging to potential students. Participant E is a vice president at a doctoral-granting public institution. Enrollment has been steadily declining over the last several years. The participant openly shared a belief that more focused business leadership could solve a lot of the challenges. The participant shared an experience of going through a campus-wide rebranding effort, and how being a strong listener and someone who values a lot of input from the campus constituents and the target audience was key to the success of that initiative. The participant focused a lot of the discussion around the primary campaign that is underway. The institution uses data analytics extensively to determine how digital advertising is performing. The participant commented on the new website and encouraged the researcher to look at the digital marketing on the website. The participant also brought some print materials and shared that the institution is moving away from some of this form of marketing: “here’s the problem with it … a tree falls in the woods and no one hears it. What good is it?” The participant shared that in times past a magazine was a good way to keep people informed about what was going on at the institution, but with all the new technology-driven initiatives, the magazine now only goes to donors. The participant shared a particular artifact from a decade ago, discussing how in times past the team could hire photographers and writers to put together this particular marketing piece that "has a pretty fancy look" to help the institution to engage with the audience. The participant went on to share that a lot of older marketing items such as this artifact are now being done with technology, and they then go on the website.

Participant F

Participant F is an assistant vice president for a doctoral-granting public institution. Participant F has worked in higher education for about seven years. Enrollment at the institution has remained rather flat, and it was slightly up last year. The participant readily admits to being rather new to the position (less than a year) and that the institution is not quite where it needs to be with data analytics. The participant acknowledges this as a weakness, and it is currently working to implement new data analytics tools and dashboards that surpass the current standard website analytics. The participant shared that the main focus right now is to encourage the team to work more collaboratively by breaking down some of the disconnected processes among the various departments. The participant shared that transparency and collaboration were key to leading a successful marketing initiative and said in this regard: "right now … do we all have the same clear understanding of the university goals?" The participant thought that having a clear focus and allowing everyone to have a platform to share their voice could encourage and enhance collaboration and transparency. The participant discussed how a lack of transparency around the university budget and budgeting process is a primary challenge to marketing the institution successfully. The participant pointed the researcher to a particular website that she was proud to display as an effective marketing initiative. The participant shared that this particular website does a nice job of explaining the reason for the targeted campaign and how the materials work together to help to tell the story.

Participant G

Participant G is a director at a bachelor's-granting public institution and has been in this role for three years. Participant G has worked in higher education for close to 10 years and has a technology background in addition to a marketing background. Enrollment at the institution has remained rather flat over the last several years. The participant stated that "Higher education is highly competitive, especially in Pennsylvania, where we have lost count of how many different schools we have all going after a declining pool of graduating high-school seniors." When discussing how to overcome challenges in the current environment, the participant shared that clear communication and granting autonomy to the team that is doing the work helps with marketing initiatives. The participant pointed out that leaders' ability to have a clear vision from both the business perspective and a creative perspective has helped the institution, and the participant shared that using a demand style of leadership will "stymie" the creativity of the team. The participant shared that the institution has historically been very conservative, so it has been working hard to shift both faculty and student perspectives to begin to broaden the programmatic offerings to help to "open up the minds of students." The participant discussed at length how the marketing department still uses some print materials, but they are "not measurable," so the focus has been on digital, where the team "can measure every interaction." The institution has been using data analytics to drive its new marketing initiatives for a couple of years, and it adjusts those initiatives to focus on return on investment. The team is now expanding into forecast modeling with certain program demographic groups to gauge how they respond to various marketing initiatives.

Participant H

Participant H has been in the higher education environment for close to 30 years and now works at a master's degree-granting private institution. In the role as chief, Participant H reports directly to the president. The participant spoke a great deal about the demographics of the state and the amount of competition in the higher education space: "the resource race has become even more intensive over the last number of years as we're all kind of competing for the same student[s]." Enrollment at the institution has remained relatively flat over the last several years, but the institution remains acutely aware that this could change. The marketing efforts for the institution are all tied to a KPI and they are likely to show a return on investment. The participant spoke at great length about the responsibility that comes with having a "seat at the table," and how he is now responsible for measuring and showing value for all the marketing efforts. The participant shared that leading a marketing team required collaboration and clear communication. Furthermore, the participant mentioned that allowing the team to maintain its independence to complete its tasks without micromanaging was key to the team's success, because each member of the team focuses on relationships and maintains a strong core of relationships with internal and external constituents. Having been in higher education for 3 decades, the participant shared a historical perspective and said, "for the longest time here … I had nothing to do with enrollment." The participant went on to share that during the 2008-2012 timeframe, when enrollment started to drop, the institution changed the focus of the marketing office from a "traditional communications" office to an office that spends 50-60% of the time marketing to prospective students. The team looks at marketplace demand when discussing new programs, and leadership conversations focus around targeting market share and gauging market demand. The participant shared a specific, unique acceptance package the institution uses with the enrollment team and how that particular item has received a lot of positive attention from prospective students due to the unique nature of the artifact.

Participant I

Participant I is a vice president at a master's-granting private institution and has been in the role less than a year. The participant has worked in higher education for about 23 years, holds a master's degree, and was quick to discuss demographics in the region and how the institution is working outside the typical demographic areas to address the decline in the number of high-school graduates. The participant also discussed having "a seat at the table," and how it was important to understand enrollment and marketing at the senior level. When discussing the importance of senior administration understanding marketing, the participant stated, "presidents will see the marketing expenditures for general awareness as being a de facto lead-gen strategy." The participant explained that marketing geared towards general awareness and marketing for enrollment were two different things, and that it was important for leaders to understand the difference. Enrollment at the institution has remained flat over the years, and efforts have remained highly attuned to keeping it that way. The participant stated that prospective students and their families are sensitive to price, and that in the higher education space, "there's a lot of similarity in it from place to place … so it's very hard to make enough of a distinction in the marketplace to separate yourself from your competition without sounding wacky." The participant shared a historical perspective that after over 2 decades in higher education, she has observed that university marketing was once part of enrollment management, and it was as simple as sending out "glossy brochures" and waiting for the class to come to the institution. With the demographic shifts and the declining number of high-school graduates, the participant shared how the institution has changed its perception of marketing on campus, focusing on prospective students and becoming more than just a crisis management team. Data analytics drive the marketing initiatives, and they also drive the approximately 500 ads that are running at any given time. Focus groups test specific marketing initiatives, and the enrollment team works with a firm to model market awareness. The institution measures these efforts for return on investment. The participant pointed the researcher to the institution's website but had no additional artifacts to share.

Emergent Themes

The researcher coded the emergent themes to understand (a) the participants' lived experiences as marketing leaders in higher education in the state of Pennsylvania, (b) the strategies and initiatives the marketing leaders perceive as effective, and (c) the perceived effect of the university's culture on marketing initiatives. Initially, 21 themes emerged from the data analysis process of each participant's explanation of their lived experiences as marketing leaders in higher education. A discussion of all these themes follows.

Budget Effect on Marketing

Each of the nine participants spoke about the budgetary constraints at their institutions and the effect of the constraints on marketing initiatives. All participants explained how they would do additional marketing initiatives if they had additional funds, but they understand that such initiatives are enrollment-driven. Participant I summarized the group sentiment:

> From the marketing standpoint, the biggest challenge is that we are an enrollment-driven institution located in the Northeast, which is facing the most dramatic demographic decline in high-school-aged, or what are regarded as traditional college students. You have to keep sort of a skeptical eye on emerging technologies and emerging platforms, and make sure that your budget is allocated properly and not cut.

Change in Leadership

Many (4 of 9) study participants perceived that leadership turnover had a negative effect on the marketing initiatives at their institutions. One participant shared that she lived through a time when a new leader came in and changed the marketing direction of the institution, and it had a very negative impact on the institution's enrollment. Other participants were more open to discussing the qualities they perceive a leader should have. Participant E discussed having more business-minded leadership, as opposed to educators in the head seat, while others discussed how their leadership teams work because of their presidents' inclusive approaches.

Seat at the Table

Three of the study participants had a seat on the president's cabinet. In each case, the person has been on cabinet for less than 2 years. Participant H said, "I'm glad to be at the table, but when you're at the table, the questions come out and the figures come out, and you really have to prove your value and your worth." Many discussed how the transition in presidential leadership brought about the inclusive change by eliminating some of the bureaucratic structure and realigning the departments to help to break down the information silos.

Aligning

Looking further into departmental synergies and aligning the institution, the vast majority of participants mentioned group buy-in or collaboration with various advisory groups or councils when discussing what helps with successful niche marketing efforts. All nine participants were happy to discuss the synergies they have found since their departments realigned with or began working with other departments to break down silos. Some participants discussed their roles as strategic partners; others talked about their collaborative approaches.

Departmental Synergies

Many of the participants mentioned their perceptions of the environment needed to increase synergies through educating the campus. Educating the campus can take various forms. Some participants viewed that through the lens of sitting at the table, while others sat on various councils, and yet others did neither. Participant D sits on a council, and he mentioned that it was a very large group that allowed for everyone to be on the same page and to bring the same information back to the teams. One participant mentioned professional development as a way to help with departmental synergies through educating people on how to work collaboratively. Two participants mentioned that with so many people "wearing multiple hats," the staffing challenges made it difficult to hit the "pause button" to assess and become strategic about their initiatives.

Educating the Campus

All the study participants spoke about the different facets of educating their respective campus constituencies. One participant shared, "every single individual believes that they have a tremendous idea." This participant added that they all think they are marketers, and that it is important to educate the campus around a shared vision. Some participants talked about their internal departments and how educating them about the types of students they are trying to attract is sometimes a challenge. Others discussed having large, diverse councils that help to share the information across campus. Certain participants tied their responses on educating the campus to having measurable goals that result from analyzing data.

Data-Enabled Goals

Each of the study participants mentioned having clear data-driven goals for their marketing initiatives to grow enrollment. Participants discussed everything from private support to marketing for recruitment and retention efforts. When talking about measurable goals around new program development, many participants shared Participant B's view: "it's important to just get everybody onboard with that particular program and [to] educate them to make sure that we achieve the goal."

Media Relations from the Outside

Many of the study participants discussed the outside perception of higher education and how trying to dismantle misinformation from outside stakeholders informed their perceptions of marketing. Participants mentioned feeling like their departments were under microscopes with all the attention they get from the media. One participant shared "that the media right now in Pennsylvania are very interested in the challenges we're facing." Many felt this was a byproduct of fewer students. Some participants discussed how they balance recruitment marketing with marketing that tells the story of why they are a viable option. Many participants discussed how marketing has changed in higher education over the years and how departments are developing more synergies.

Energizing

In an effort to better understand the participants' perceptions about leadership, the researcher asked the participants what characteristic someone in their position should avoid. The overwhelming majority said that micromanaging and stifling the creativity of the team was the number one thing a leader should avoid. Participant H stated that he did not limit the staff; instead, he encouraged them to try new things and to succeed, thus allowing them to grow professionally.

Based on the participants' perceptions, educating, aligning, and energizing the institution requires a clear understanding of who the institution is trying to attract and how the team will work collectively and collaboratively to share the responsibility of developing a niche in the highly competitive higher education landscape.

The higher education environment is enrollment-driven, and the enrollment demographic in Pennsylvania is shrinking. As Participant I stated, "I don't do dumb advertising. I'm going to do smart advertising. I need to know whether it's working at any given time." Utilizing technology in a more effective and efficient manner allows for the use of metric-driven and data-driven initiatives that can show a return on investment.

Niche Marketing

According to the study participants, niche marketing in higher education focuses on unique program offerings and the unique story of the institution. Participant G noted that niche marketing involved drilling down to the student's interest level, stating,

> For us, the niche might be drilling down to the student interest in a particular cluster, or a program, if a cluster of programs isn't quite narrow enough for us to be able to get to a couple of different personas of students. It's really drilling down to those personas and being able to speak to them as if we're speaking to the individual.

Participant D identified that niche marketing should intentionally focus on the target audience, stating that niche marketing was "Meeting people with intention. It is looking at who they are, how they utilize technology, where are they spending their time, and tailoring your message and your method to that." With this perspective on niche marketing in higher education, the older, more bureaucratic framework is struggling to meet the relationship needs of the changing, technology-enabled environment.

Strategies and Initiatives

The nine participants described various strategies and initiatives they use in the higher education environment. Those strategies and initiatives fall into the following categories: use of data and analytics, marketing specific programs, and the use of external firms. Each of the three categories had associated subcategories (Table 3):

Table 3

Strategies and Initiatives

Category	Subcategory
Use of Data and Analytics	*Cataloging Data*, *Delivering Decision-Making Data*, *Postmortem Analysis and Assessment*, *Social Media*, *Tracking Data*, *Use of Data*, *Website Redesign*.
Marketing Specific Programs	*Direct Visible Marketing*, *Finding New Marketplaces*, *Focusing on Diversity*, *Forecasting Demographics*, *Freshman Starter Programs*.
Use of External Firms	*Billboards*, *Institutional Research Department*, *Fostering a Giving Environment*.

Use of Data and Analytics

The study participants' perceptions show that the marketing environment of today is using advanced analytics and data to help to drive decisions. The participants mentioned the use of data dashboards and analytics to help to drive marketing decisions that are tied to benchmarks and that show a return on investment. Nearly all (8 of 9) of the participants mentioned that utilizing data in this way helps them to understand what the audience wants. As Participant E stated, utilizing data differently helps the institution to determine "what majors do we invest in and where do we downsize." Many participants also mentioned that the data allow them to determine where to market based on the audience reach. A few participants mentioned having a content management system that ties into their metrics dashboard. Participant D shared, “we take a look at that on platform on a weekly, monthly, or quarterly basis … then we also balance that with the enrollment data through our admission CRM [customer relationship management] system.” Regardless of how the participants used the data and analytics, every participant mentioned the importance of having access to good data.

Marketing Specific Programs

Nearly all participants (8 of 9) focused on what the consumer wants as an important aspect of niche marketing. Participant E said, “you can have all the marketing in the world that you want, but if you’re not marketing what students want, what’s it really matter?” Participant E concisely summarized the consumer wants topic, stating, “you have to have the programs the students want and you have to be affordable.” When discussing what helps to market niche programs, many participants stated that they have had a great deal of success with digital marketing by establishing the overall picture of the programs and then by fostering the group to help it to understand where there are marketing gaps. Other participants mentioned that they utilize tools such as program questionnaires to develop the who, what, where, and why, and to gain a better sense of the target audience’s wants and needs. The goal of the questionnaire process is to help to determine what makes the program unique so that institutions can develop multimodal plans. Last, certain participants mentioned the use of developed personas. The participants explained that they use modeling to develop student personas to help to determine how to personalize the communications better for the particular audience or demographic they are striving to attract.

Use of External Firms

The participants noted that there are times when they use external firms to provide support in areas that the universities cannot provide through their own teams. These services range from branding initiatives to analytic services that help the marketing team to reach outside its normal abilities and capacities.

All nine study participants mentioned that they partner with an outside firm. Certain participants mentioned that they utilize these firms to provide guidance to their administration regarding tuition structuring. Others discussed how they use firms for distributing their digital ads because of the time and level of expertise such an activity requires. Participants often mentioned utilizing a firm currently or in the recent past to help to launch a campaign because of the volume of work a campaign requires. Participant F summarized the use of external firms, stating, “working with our agencies and partners, they know what tools are available to tell the stories through the right mechanism”. Participant H had a different viewpoint, yet the same reason: “like I said, I think it’s a crowded marketplace, and all of us are out there trying to own and maintain sustained digital space.” The use of external firms varied by purpose across the nine participants. Some participants used the firms to provide analytics and various data sets, some participants used the firms to help to brand the institution, and some used the firms for various marketing services. The one thing that was consistent across the participants was that they use the external firms to support initiatives that the universities cannot provide in house.

Using Data and Technology Differently

Many of the participants (5 of 9) discussed ways of using data and technology differently to help to grow enrollment. The participants mentioned that a culture shift had to continue to get the various constituents thinking about how to embrace the use of analytics. Participant D shared, "it's been a little bit of a shift in culture to get the team ready to think more about analytics and to pay close attention to what it's telling us." Many of the participants shared that they were working to identify and address specific segments of the population, whether it be students in a geographic location, commuter students, or those interested in increasing online offerings. Other participants mentioned using data to look at broader regions and the impact of marketing to different populations outside Pennsylvania. Certain participants, like Participant E, mentioned the cultural aspects of using data differently:

> Our faculty … need to create, to be flexible and to have the forethought to create the academic programs that the workforce needs. So I think that's what's hurting a lot of us right now. And I think a lot of that has to do with our culture. I really do.

Participant H added to this viewpoint, stating, "I think the expectation is that everything that you do when you reach out to an audience needs to be personalized and relevant to them. We're developing personas for all of those audiences." Participants who did not mention using data and technology focused on the cultural challenges surrounding implementing such changes at their respective institutions.

Institutional Culture

The portrayal of an institutional culture varied across each participant's story and among the various institutions they represented. Although each participant was able to express these cultural challenges concisely, the participants overwhelmingly believed that institutional culture can have an impact on the marketing initiatives of the institution. Many of the study participants shared their views on collaboration in the higher education environment, and Participant A summarized it by saying,

> It's more about coming up with those solutions together or at least talking through them, because I have found in a higher ed environment, folks have an innate need to be engaged and involved in decision making.

Slow to Meet Changing Demographics

The participants had multiple perceptions of why their institutions were slow to meet the needs and demands of the changing demographics. Some participants held the view that the marketing office was rather new to the institution or that the office only came about after the institution experienced enrollment declines. Participants who mentioned having a rather new office mentioned that prior to the existence of the marketing office, most efforts were uncoordinated and unsuccessful, because staff lacked the overall understanding of how to market to students. With the demographic shift in Pennsylvania and the declining population of high-school graduates, those participants perceived the increased importance of the work their areas produced. Participant A showed a different side of why marketing in higher education is slow to meet the changing demographics, stating, "there is somewhat of a cultural mindset that we don't need marketing. That we stand on our own. Everybody knows about us. Well, in truth, they don't. We're not doing a very good job at differentiating ourselves."

Significance of Telling the Story

Telling the story of the institution is key to differentiating the institution. The participants' perceptions of the importance of strategically planning initiatives with the ability to move quickly towards maintaining or creating a niche with a demographic focus illustrate the important of differentiating the institution.

The researcher asked the study participants what the meaning of telling the story is in the marketing environment. Each participant's response shows how important this aspect is in the higher education marketing environment. Some participants discussed the emotional connection that comes from telling the story of the institution. The participants all discussed the concept of telling the story of student success. Many participants discussed highlighting a particular program and then identifying a student who fits the storyline by going through the program and finding a job in his or her desired field. Multiple participants discussed telling the story of the institution through the lens of building the brand and discussing the historical significance of the institution. The participants' overall perception on telling the story of the institution was that the story must be relevant and it must be meaningful to the audience in a way that informs and stirs action on the part of the person who is receiving the message.

Public awareness is key to an institution being able to embrace and create a successful niche market. Without the ability to tell the story of the institution properly, it is possible to run into a scenario such as the one Participant H related:

> I had someone ask me yesterday, "what makes your college unique?" I looked at them and said, "I'm going to be honest with you, nothing." We have the same basic things that other institutions offer.

The interesting aspect of this scenario is that Participant H was able to move the response to the individual in this direction,

> If I'm talking about the new degree, I'm not talking about the degree, and what it does. They already know that. I'm talking about John Smith's experience in it, and how he's been able to be placed in a position, and what it's allowed him to do, and the kinds of things that he's learned.

Participant H was tailoring the response to a niche program that the institution offers and moving the conversation past the typical response Participant I mentioned: "everybody has the same staff. Everybody has an English department. Everybody has, you know, 'Well we have 200 clubs.' Everybody says it, of what makes the college unique." The aforementioned exchange highlights the perception that a niche is oftentimes program focused with an explanation that associates to a real-life student-centered story.

The researcher grouped the 21 themes into six main themes based on similarities among the content. The data analysis resulted in six overarching themes with 15 subthemes. Because the themes of institutional culture, telling the story, and creating a niche did not fit with the other themes, they became stand-alone main themes. Not every participant experienced each subtheme, but the repeated occurrence of the same themes helped to support the investigator's triangulation. Table 4 shows the six emergent themes and the associated subthemes.

Table 4

Main Themes

Theme	Subthemes
Educating, Aligning, and Energizing the Institution	*Change in Leadership*, *Departmental Synergies*, *Educating the Campus*, *Everyone Thinks They Are a Marketer*, *Having Clear Goals*, *Media Relations from the Outside*, *Niche Marketing*, *Seat at the Table*
Significance of Budgetary and Resource Constraints	*Budget Effect on Marketing*, *Staffing Challenges (Too Few; Too Many)*
Understanding Consumer Behavior by Using Data and Technology Differently	*Keeping up with Technology*, *Retention Focused*, *Thinking About Ways to Grow Enrollment*, *Using Data Differently*
Institutional Culture	*Slow to Meet Changing Demographics*
Significance of Telling the Story	
Significance of Creating a Niche	

Theme 1: Educating, Aligning, and Energizing the Institution

Four of the nine study participants discussed how a *change in leadership* has a negative effect on the marketing initiatives of the institution. Participant B highlighted the challenge that comes as a result of the change in leadership, stating, “there’s always a change in leadership, and you don’t know what a change in leadership’s going to bring about.” The participant added that she has experienced both a leader who let the team continue working on current initiatives and the opposite, where a new leader went a different direction. “If you have someone that comes in and has completely different ideas, it could stifle anything that you could do.” One participant told the story of how a president had been at the institution for over 5 years and how with the leadership transition came a *seat at the table*. For over a decade, in the previous leadership structure the participant had reported to a vice president. The participant discussed the benefit of sitting on the president’s cabinet, namely being “more involved in the strategic decision and less about reactionary initiatives in response to something.”

Each study participant spoke about the different people on campus who should understand and participate in the marketing efforts. One participant mentioned top leaders having a clear understanding of strategic marketing. Participants shared about breaking down internal silos to help collaboration among departments. Some participants discussed their internal departments and how educating them about the types of students they are trying to attract is sometimes a challenge. One participant stated, “at my institution there’s a history of understanding marketing communication as the people you call when something goes wrong.” That participant went on to say, “my biggest challenge is getting people to understand, culturally here, understand what marketing communication actually is.” Others discussed having large, diverse councils that help to share the information across campus. Participants consistently discussed analyzing data and setting measurable goals. Certain participants tied their responses on educating the campus to having measurable goals that result from analyzing data. Another participant said, “So having a group of individuals talk about that and then let’s talk about how the ideas that they have, or what their end goal is, how do we achieve that?”

Using data to set measurable goals was a possible way to ensure a return on the marketing investment. One participant shared a perspective on *educating the campus* by stating, “We spent a great deal of time still educating our internal clients and helping them to understand what type of students we’re trying to recruit.” The participant added that this effort required educating the campus on the overall brand position and the university mission. One participant took the discussion a different direction and discussed how educating prospective students and parents about financial aid was important. The participant shared the following story:

> So we’ll have parents who, in my previous institution, would literally pay more to another school because the scholarship award was larger. So School A might cost 50,000. School B cost 40,000. School A gives a $30,000 scholarship. School B gives a $21,000 scholarship. So the net on School B is 19, the net over here is 20. They’ll go to the other one, because the scholarship shows I love my kid more.

Each of the study participants mentioned having clear *data-enabled goals* associated with their marketing initiatives to grow enrollment. One participant discussed group buy-in to reach a goal, saying, “it’s important to just get everybody onboard with that particular program and educated … to make sure that we achieve the goal.” Another participant discussed data-enabled goal setting further, saying that goal setting allowed the team to stay focused on the university’s main priorities of recruitment, retention, and increasing financial support.

Participant E discussed how she had never seen higher education questioned as much as it is today. Participant E attributed this new perception to the lack of students. The participant added the *media relations from the outside* perception that higher education is becoming a less viable option in Pennsylvania. Participant E stated, “I don’t think marketing and admissions can save us, but I think they could be able to help parents and students understand why we are still a viable option.” Participant C stated that the people on the front lines need help to carry a positive message outside the campus. The participant added that by working in a collaborative manner on campus, there is a better chance that the positive message will get to the outside through better internal open communications.

All nine participants gave their perceptions about the environment and how to increase *departmental synergies* through educating the campus. Participant D discussed how having open communications throughout the departments has helped. Participant D said, “on our campus, we have what’s called *council*, and that is made up of everyone from the cabinet level, including deans and then their direct reports.” This participant added that the large group allows everyone to be on the same page as those in attendance and then to take that information back to their teams. Participant H mentioned that departmental synergies increase when the institution recognizes the need to increase its focus on professional development.

Looking further into *aligning* the institution, seven of the nine study participants mentioned group buy-in or collaboration when discussing what helps with successful niche marketing efforts. Some of the participants mentioned the synergy that comes from having certain offices such as communications, admissions, and enrollment management aligned with each other. Many participants referred to this realignment and increase in campus-wide collaboration as breaking down the silos. The participants perceived the breaking down of silos as a way to increase a cohesive identity and a cohesive message for the institution. Participant E highlighted the continued need for a more cohesive message: “the marketing can bring awareness. Admissions ultimately has to close the deal.” Participant D, who stated, “you have to have buy in and support up at the top of the organization to help filter that through all of our various constituency levels,” summarized the reason so many participants discussed group buy-in. Working to align the departments within the institution can also have positive effects on the financial aspects of the marketing initiatives. Participant F stated that knowing “what dollars does communications and marketing own, what do our colleagues in admissions own, what do our colleagues in grad studies, what do our colleagues in academic affairs, and how do we collaborate” can be an effective way to gain collaboration and group buy-in around a campus marketing initiative. Participant E alluded to the internal operations of the institution, saying, “to me the antiquated ways that we operate sometimes as a university [don’t help]. I don’t think educators are necessarily the best individuals to be making decisions as to how to run universities.” The participant went on to say, “I think those with fundraising, financial, external relations backgrounds think that that’s a cultural shift that we need to see. We need more business-minded people in the head seat.”

In an effort to understand the participants’ perceptions about leadership better, the researcher asked participants what characteristics someone in their position should avoid. The responses varied, but the general theme was the same. The participants overwhelmingly agreed that micromanaging and stifling the creativity of the team was the number one thing for a leader to avoid. Participant H summarized the overall *energizing* leadership theme by stating,

> I think you limit your staff professionally by not giving them the freedom to stretch their legs, and kind of gain experiences of various areas. Yeah, I try to step back and let people try things.… I try to hire good people and then step back and let them go and grow.

Based on the participants' perceptions, educating, aligning, and energizing the institution requires a clear understanding of who the institution is trying to attract and how the team will work collectively and collaboratively to share the responsibility of developing a niche in the highly competitive higher education landscape.

Theme 2: Significance of Budgetary and Resource Constraints

Each of the nine study participants spoke about the budgetary constraints at the institution and the effect of the constraints on marketing initiatives. Participant A discussed how it was difficult to make a case for increased departmental funding being a marketing leader at a smaller, tuition-driven institution. Participant A discussed how being "able to make the case for the appropriate level of funds to market and advertise the institution is tough," and being in an area that has a declining demographic creates a budgetary challenge. "No matter how strong of an argument I put forward, there's still only so much money available at the end of the day." Other participants discussed being challenged by limited resources: "I'm sure like many other institutions we are challenged by resources.… We are very tuition dependent." Participant I summarized the overall enrollment challenge, the demographic challenge, and the dependence on tuition revenue:

> From the marketing standpoint, the biggest challenge is that we are a private, enrollment-driven institution located in the Northeast, which is facing the most dramatic demographic decline in high-school-aged, or what are regarded as traditional college

> students. You have to keep sort of a skeptical eye on emerging technologies and emerging platforms, and make sure that your budget is allocated properly and not cut.

Each of the study participants discussed the various costs of their marketing initiatives. Many participants shared about digital advertising. Participant B said, “it takes a lot of money and resources to do some of the things that we like to do, such as digital advertising.” Participant C shared similar concerns: “the budget that we have here in the offices is obviously small. That is the biggest challenge is not being able to do the big splashy ads, not being able to be in everybody’s backyard.” Participant E shared a similar perspective: “you need money to be able to really market appropriately and it’s a challenge in this current environment.” Participant G shared, “we’re dealing with a smaller budget compared to like, maybe a research institution or another college or university, they may have a large endowment.” Participant G added, “we don’t have those huge budgets to be able to reach out to audiences the way someone that does have easily 10 times the size of our budget to work with.” Participant D discussed being diligent with the given resources and talked about how assessing the competition plays a role in marketing initiative, stating, “budgetary issues are among … [the] chief difficulties for us and making sure that we are being diligent about assessing where we are in competition with market spending among our chief competitors.” Participant F discussed how having an overall understanding of the budget process across campus is important:

> Clarity on budgets, how are the budgets put together and certainly, having the team know that our bread and butter is undergrad admissions, so how do we help with that to make sure we have the budget. They should have an understanding of how the budgets come about so that way hopefully that will help them do their job better.

The higher education environment is enrollment-driven, and as the participants stated, the enrollment demographic in Pennsylvania is shrinking. As Participant I stated, “I don’t do dumb advertising. I’m going to do smart advertising. I need to know whether it’s working at any given time.” Utilizing technology in a more effective and efficient manner allows for the use of metric-driven and data-driven initiatives that can show a return on investment.

Theme 3: Understanding Consumer Behavior by Using Data and Technology Differently

Each of the nine study participants spoke about *ways to grow enrollment*. Participant A discussed how thinking differently about certain populations is beneficial when paired with increasing the use of technology:

> Our institution has to think differently about the commuter population, the nontraditional student, like from our adult degree programming, someone that will be taking solely online courses. So broadening our toolkit, if you will, to start to target types of students that we have not done in the past.

Participant B discussed marketing towards a particular program population in an area that the data suggests would be beneficial, saying, “We’ve learned that we do have a good market in a certain city that we could continue to grow.” The participant went on to describe the marketing effort as a niche initiative “to get specifically nursing students from a specific area into the university.” Participant C discussed how targeting marketing efforts outside the state was beneficial when paired with utilizing a hybrid online course approach: the institution can “reach out to different demographics outside of Pennsylvania” to start the conversation about having more hybrid classes, whereby the students have a couple of classroom sessions, with rest of the work online.

Participant D discussed how the use of data can help to identity regions outside the state that show growth potential. This participant further discussed how this approach was beneficial when designed with a multimodal plan, stating, “We also would like to make sure that we are taking into consideration of broader sample of impact throughout other regions of the U.S.” The participant shared that he researches trends in higher education from reputable sources to find markets outside Pennsylvania to incorporate into the plan, “[what] we try to do is program specific, find those key words, find those key organizations, find those key touch points that we can leverage in building a multimodal plan.” When discussing the impact looking outside the state of Pennsylvania can have on enrollment, Participant I shared, “we saw increases from those efforts of bringing in students from out of state, because we went specifically to out-of-state audiences.” Participant F also discussed looking outside Pennsylvania and sharing the message of offering a value-added quality education, adding,

> One thing I know [is] that we’re trying to make more of an effort … whether it’s New Jersey, Maryland, that’s that fine line of trying to show value, but that it’s still a quality education, and that’s how we compete against folks.

Participant H summarized the overall topic of looking for markets outside Pennsylvania:

> All of us are trying to expand our territories, because we’re looking for students. A lot of it is based on the plan. We are just beginning to grow our graduate marketing. We have had graduate programs in place for a number of years. They have been part-time evening-based for working professionals. I think the expectation is that everything that you do when you reach out to an audience needs to be personalized and relevant to them. We’re developing personas for all of those audiences.

Both Participant E and Participant F discussed using data to discover what niche programs can meet the needs of the workforce. Participant E stated that "The willingness of our faculty … to create, to be flexible, and to have the forethought to create the academic programs that the workforce needs" is key to meeting the customer's wants and needs. Participant G discussed the topic of workforce needs based on the shifting demographics: "as far as the workforce goes, we do have programs now like nursing, a lot of our other health science programs, childhood education, human services."

Many of the study participants discussed ways of *using data and technology differently* and how the institution was slow to adopt the use of technology. Participant C discussed how social media has changed the marketing landscape and how the institution was slow to adopt to the change in technology, stating, "as we move forward, we have to be a little more detailed with those. But this is our first shot at trying to see where we need to go and where we're at." Participant D shared a similar viewpoint: "it's been a little bit of a shift in culture to get the team ready to think more about analytics and to pay close attention to what it's telling us." Participant F added, "they either don't know what information to share and/or they get hung up on knowledge is power or [the] kind of people playing outside of their sandbox."

Many of the participants mentioned *retention-focused* initiatives along with enrollment. Participant G discussed using data and incorporating the social interests of the students into initiatives along with a historical marketing perspective:

> In the past, we have separated the students, I believe, into five buckets based on admission status. Whether they were a lead, an inquiry, an applicant, they had deposited or communicated their intent to enroll, I guess, before deposit. So now we're segmenting

> much of the inquiry population by their intended major of study and also starting to segment based on their social interests. So not just that academic side of it.
>
> I know the one thing that we are responding to is in terms of that modeling and changing up how we do things is what that forecast looks like for [the] high-school population through 2029 as a pretty accurate forecast of available students.

Participant H discussed how his institution has started using data in a completely different way and it has incorporated measures in the marketing plan for the institution:

> My institutional marketing plan … this year has under each initiative a series of KPIs, and then direct metrics that need to be measured. That's how I am measured on my work. Before, we kind of had chunks and pieces. We're in a much better position now, where we've been able to pull all that together and really have a grid of analysis that provides us not only with successes and challenges, but also then the sense of direction.

As this study has revealed, there are many ways to use data and data analytics to deliver intentional marketing content that is relatable to the intended audience. Most of the marketing initiatives about which the participants shared focused directly on the different ways the institution is attempting to grow enrollment.

Theme 4: Institutional Culture

Institutional cultures varied across each participant's story and among the various institutions that they represent. McCarthy (2014) stated that "the ability to keep up with the pace of change is limited by organizations' infrastructure and capacity to adapt. Key factors include organizational constraints and culture." Although each participant was able to express these cultural challenges concisely, the participants overwhelmingly believed that institutional culture can have an impact on the marketing initiatives of the institution. Participant D said,

> If you are in a tough spot with culture, if people are not buying it, if there's some contentious things happening, that's one of the most difficult scenarios, because from the marketing or public relations perspective, we can put out positive stories, the expectation for what people will encounter with interacting with our institutions' representatives, but if there is not that same culture and attitude reflected back to them, then that makes for the incongruence and the inconsistency. And that presents a significant challenge that is very simple to see from an outside perspective.

When the researcher asked what institutional cultural factors the participants perceived affected marketing at their respective institutions, Participant A commented about the age of the marketing office and said, "the concept of an office of marketing and communications is relatively young for our institution." Pressing further into how the institution's culture and internal structure effected the marketing initiatives, the participant said, "so prior to that, most of the efforts to advertise were willy-nilly; there was no strategic plan." Participant H discussed how the campus perceives the marketing office and how that perception has changed over time with the change in demographics:

> The years where we really started to see enrollment drop, there was a drastic change in how the work of my office was perceived, and we began to become much more involved. I went from doing relatively nothing for enrollment for a number of years. It was kind of that world, where admissions did their thing, to spending probably the last couple of years anywhere from 50 to 60% of my time working directly on marketing to prospective students.

Participant A showed a different side of why marketing in higher education is *slow to meet the changing demographics*, stating, "Our institution is very old, there is a lot of history. There's a lot of success in that many years, and so there is somewhat of a cultural mindset that we don't need marketing." This participant continued to share that the cultural mindset of the institution–attracting students based on its historical reputation–was faulty, and that due to the increased competition, the institution was falling behind and not doing a very good job at differentiating itself from the competition.

Telling the story of the institution is key to differentiating the institution. The participants' perceptions of the importance of strategically planning initiatives with the ability to move quickly towards maintaining or creating a niche with a demographic focus illustrated the important of differentiating the institution.

Theme 5: Significance of Telling the Story

The researcher asked the study participants what meaning telling the story holds in the marketing environment. Each participant's response shows how important this aspect is in the higher education marketing environment. Some participants focused on the emotional connection that telling the institution's story has on students: "there still is a tremendous influence that comes from that emotional connection of the students to your institution, and that's where the story comes in." Participant B discussed how social media play a role in telling the story:

> The story is very important … like a student that has found success. And that's where we do push that stuff out through social media. The story for students would be seeing another student, letting them know, yeah. I like to hear it's a good place to go.

Participant E discussed how the story creates relevance for students by showing them how the institution is different from the competitors, thus helping prospective students to answer the question of why they should come to the university. Participant C developed the idea of answering why for prospective students: "do people want to know the history of the institution and what we do and that we are the high value, high quality option in Pennsylvania … or do they just want to know they're going to get a job?" Participant F helped to answer this question and shared that the story must be meaningful to the audience. Participant F said, "how do you have meaningful stories that people know?" The participant went on to explain that the student wants to know that "you get a great education, hands-on learning experiences, it's affordable, you're going to be prepared to go out and get a job, and that you're going to be a global citizen and hopefully give back to your community."

Participant H discussed how the story at his institution relates to the student's experience with the relevant program offerings:

> It has to be of interest. I'm not talking about the degree … I'm talking about John Smith's experience in it, and how he's been able to be placed in a position, and what it's allowed him to do, and the kinds of things that he's learned.

Participant G developed the concept of a relevant story and shared a perspective on how the student or prospective student relates to the story: "story is key … sharing students' successes with honesty … allows a student or prospective students to see themselves in the shoes of the person that's being told the story."

Telling the story of the institution is also part of the branding of the college or university. Participant D discussed how the story plays into the brand of the institution: "story is everything. And that's really been at the heart of building this brand." The participant shared that explaining to the audience what the university is known for (its niche) and then tying that into the culture and the emotional aspect for the student of going to "a home away from home" helps to share elements of life at the institution and exposes the student to the opportunity that awaits. Participant G discussed why developing this identity is important, "but it's not just telling the story … it's how you can be authentic about it and have it not look like marketing" when sharing what is unique about the institution. Public awareness is key to an embracing and creating a successful niche market. Without the ability to tell the story of the institution properly, it is difficult to niche market a unique aspect of the student experience.

Theme 6: Significance of Creating a Niche

Five of the nine participants mentioned either a specific program or a demographic in their responses to the niche marketing question. Participant A discussed demographics and geographic regions and said that niche marketing was "really honing in on a specific demographic and even down to a specific geography" and then attempting to be strategic about how to develop a campaign that is specific for the group. Participant B discussed niche marketing as marketing for a specific program. "When I think of niche marketing, it's something that's going to have a payoff for the university." This participant explained that niche marketing was a specific program that is going to bring new students to the university and show a return on the marketing investment. Two of the nine participants discussed the importance of "not being everything to everyone" in developing a niche. In that regard, the participants shared that honing in on what the institution is known for and focusing on a particular group or audience was key to developing a niche. Participant E circled back to the program-specific view by stating, "it might be a college related to a major campaign focused on specific majors." Marketing a specific program or marketing to a specific demographic population is one perspective of niche marketing.

Participant D brought forward another perspective that incorporated the programmatic element: "it is meeting people with intention. It is looking at who they are, how they utilize technology, where are they spending their time, and tailoring your message and your method to that.” Multiple participants discussed audience engagement. Participant G discussed audience engagement levels and particular interests, saying, “it’s finally refining the level of the audience that you’re looking to attract.” Looking past just programmatic offerings, this participant shared that “for us the niche might be drilling down to the student interest in a particular program … it’s really drilling down to those personas and being able to speak to them as if we’re speaking to the individual.” This participant is utilizing technology to forecast personas in a particular segment in an effort to speak directly to the student. Participant I shared a similar perspective: “in your student pool, you’re going to have six or seven different demographic trends that tend to be the majority of your group and tailoring the message to those specific individuals [is important].”

Meshing the ability to tell the institutional story with a niche program that the institution offers can begin to create a niche market in the higher educational environment. Each participant’s lived experience recognized that a niche in higher education is oftentimes defined around the needs of a specific program or demographic group.

Summary

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand (a) the participants’ lived experiences as marketing leaders in higher education in the state of Pennsylvania, (b) the strategies and initiatives the marketing leaders perceive as effective, and (c) the perceived effect of the university’s culture on marketing initiatives. The researcher interviewed nine participants who shared their perceptions as marketing leaders in higher education in the state of Pennsylvania. The participants shared their perceptions on successful strategies and initiatives. The data analysis grouped the strategies and initiatives into three categories: use of data and analytics, marketing specific programs, and use of external firms. These three categories generated 15 subcategories through the data analysis process.

The data analysis process generated 21 original themes. The researcher then grouped and organized the themes based on their similarities into six main themes: *educating, aligning, and energizing the institution*, *significance of budgetary and resource constraints*, *understanding consumer behavior by using data and technology differently*, *institutional culture*, *significance of telling the story*, and *significance of creating a niche.* The participants' perceptions show that niche marketing in higher education focuses mainly on a particular program or demographic group. The final chapter provides a further explanation of the findings, the significance of the finding, and suggestions for how the results can be useful to the various stakeholders.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

In a highly competitive, rapidly changing environment the need to invest in technology and data analytics is upon us. The marketing environment continues to change as consumer behaviors evolve and they produce new consumer wants and needs (Goldsmith & Moutinho, 2017). This study has revealed a perception that releasing higher education institutions from traditional marketing strategies of the past via technology and data-enabled niche marketing is a viable growth-strategy. This study has shown how a customized program or demographic marketing approach can add value to the met and unmet needs of prospective students. This approach starts with leveraging technology and data, niche marketing strategies, and innovative leadership. Examining the perceptions of niche market initiatives by various higher education marketing decision makers allowed the researcher to shed light on the perception of these initiatives in an effort to help increase student enrollment. The goal of this study was to illustrate the lived experiences of higher education marketing leaders in the state of Pennsylvania and their perceptions of effective marketing strategies in light of the shifting trends in marketing, increased competition between colleges and universities, and the need for isolating the uniqueness of a university. This is an important area of study given the extreme financial strain facing higher education, societal and demographic shifts, and because full-fledged rebranding is a very expensive endeavor (Shepard, 2015).

Vriens and Kidd (2014) proposed that marketers of the future will use advanced analytics and big data to help to drive profits by focusing on market forecasting, quantifying needs and motivation, analyzing drivers of brand share, product and pricing optimization, marketing mix and marketing efficiency modeling, and customer dynamics. According to Goldsmith and

Moutinho (2017), there is a consistent theme from the marketing consulting firms that "all types must adapt their strategies to the new realities of a changing marketplace in which consumers are enabled by technology to consume differently than in the past" (p. 37). The participants' lived experiences show that marketing in the higher education environment has shifted to a majority of initiatives that utilize digital solutions. As the participants shared, they are utilizing technology and engaging constituents to identify their unmet needs, which ties directly into what Kokolus (2016) and Goldsmith and Moutinho (2017) discussed about creating a niche to service the unmet needs of the students.

The researcher began the process by sending out an e-mail to 19 marketing leaders across the state of Pennsylvania explaining the purpose of the study and asking for voluntary participation. The nine marketing leaders who were willing to participate then received the consent form and the qualifying questionnaire via the REDCap survey tool. The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews in person with the nine participants on an individual basis. The 28 structured questions had four categories: leadership and culture, demographics, technology, and marketing. Of the nine interviews, three took place face to face at a location of the participants choosing, and six took place via Zoom. The researcher transcribed the interviews and reviewed the transcripts before sending draft copies to the participants via e-mail for member checking to ensure and confirm that the transcripts were accurate (Creswell, 2007). Data-collection efforts continued until there was data saturation. Data saturation occurred by the 9th interview, when no new knowledge emerged (Merriam, 2009). The researcher accomplished triangulation by obtaining marketing artifacts from the participants and comparing them with participants' answers. The researcher assigned pseudonyms to the participants, changing any identifiable names, such as institution names, to protect the participants' privacy. The researcher has presented direct quotes and the stories the participants told in a way that ensures confidentiality.

Data analysis followed Smith and Osborn's (2009) six step method: Reading and re-reading transcripts, initial coding and noting developing emergent themes, searching for connections across emergent themes, moving to the next case, and looking for patterns across cases. The precoding process began with the researcher identifying significant statements (Saldaña, 2012). Using the significant statements, the researcher organized the data by first focusing on the three areas of culture, lived experiences, and strategies and initiatives. Twenty-one themes emerged from the data analysis process, with each participant's explanation of his or her lived experiences as marketing leaders in higher education. The researcher grouped the 21 themes into six main themes based on the similarities in the content. The data analysis resulted in six overarching themes with 15 subthemes. The six main themes were *educating, aligning, and energizing the institution*, *significance of budgetary and resource constraints*, *understanding consumer behavior by using data and technology differently*, *institutional culture*, *significance of telling the story*, and *significance of creating a niche.*

The participants described various strategies and initiatives they used in the higher education environment. The researcher broke these strategies and initiatives down into the following central themes: use of data and analytics, marketing specific programs, and the use of external firms.

Interpretation of Findings

The participants shared their perceptions about marketing in the higher education setting in the state of Pennsylvania. All the participants identified niche marketing as a core marketing strategy and they defined niche marketing in their own terms. Central to each participant's definition was the idea of a niche program or demographic population. The participants also had a shared understanding of the importance of data and data analytics to the marketing decisions the institution makes. Each participant also had a clear view of the challenges surrounding the demographic decline in the state of Pennsylvania and the significance of that phenomenon for the budget. Many of the participants discussed collaboration as a way to improve marketing initiatives, and all participants shared how their institutions' cultures and stories play a role in the marketing environment.

Participants cited several common perceptions as marketing leaders. Twenty-one themes emerged from the data analysis process. The data analysis resulted in six overarching themes with 15 subthemes. The six main themes were central to each participant's interview. The subthemes were common to some participants, but not all participants shared the same subthemes. The following three subsections further describe the interpretation of the study findings as they relate to the research questions.

What are the Lived Experiences of Marketing Leaders in Higher Education in the State of Pennsylvania?

Participants in the study had diverse backgrounds, with higher education experience ranging from less than 1 year to as many as 30 years. The average participant has been in higher education for about 14 years. The institutions for which participants worked varied from public to private and from baccalaureate-granting to doctorate-granting institutions. According to the data the researcher collected from the College Scorecard website, the institutions varied in undergraduate student population from around 700 to 8,300.

Turnover in leadership position(s). Many study participants perceived that having a high rate of leadership turnover had a negative effect on the marketing initiatives at their institutions. Herman (2008) shared that transformational leadership influenced followers' actual turnover within the organization. Several participants discussed how their leadership teams worked because of their presidents' inclusive approaches.

The niche market principles that Lawrence (2013) discussed relate to the participant discussion around having more business-minded leadership as opposed to having educators in the head seat. Participant G shared that marketing decisions at her institution are collaborative in nature and that the entire team is involved in the various marketing initiatives. The participant added that the inclusive approach works to drive successful initiatives at the institution. This aligns with the research of Freund (2017), who stated, "the concept of shared leadership arises from the need to navigate complex pressures found in traditional bureaucratic organizational structures" (p. 14). Using these structures to turn institutions into more inclusive and collaborative organizations may lead to more successful niche marketing initiatives. The participant's institution has had flat enrollment for a number of years. To gauge consumer wants and workforce needs, the institution has been using data tools, and it is now using data analytics to help to guide social interests in addition to the well-defined market segmenting that already exists in marketing initiatives.

The traditional leadership model with a single leader fails to address the complex, multifaceted need for collaboration among the team (Freund, 2017). The institutional hierarchy information from the participants shows that regardless of title, only three of the nine participants directly supervised all the people in their department or division. The three participants were a director, an associate vice president, and a vice president. This means that the vast majority of the study participants have a divisional hierarchy that is much like the typical university structure. The typical higher education institution has a reputation of adapting to change slowly, and many studies show a correlation to organizational change and senior leadership (Titterton, 2013). Taking a more inclusive approach, leaders can build a deeper bench of employees who engage with internal and external constituents on a deeper level (Freund, 2017). When looking at the three participants (each with a different title) who oversaw all the members of their marketing teams, each of the participants discussed having an institution in which they felt they could work with senior leadership either directly or through some other internal mechanism. Each of the three participants' institutions currently has either an increase in freshman enrollment or flat enrollment, according to the participants.

Seat at the strategic decision-making table. Three of the study participants had seats on their presidents' cabinets. In each case, the person had been on cabinet for less than 2 years. Participant H said that he was glad to be at the table helping with strategic decisions, but that being at the table means you have to prove your worth. As Freund (2017) discussed, the traditional leadership model with a single leader fails to address the complex, multifaceted need for collaboration among the team. Numerous participants discussed how a transition in presidential leadership brought about inclusive change by eliminating some of the bureaucratic structure. As Dow (2008) and McCully and McDaniel (2007) pointed out, there is an increased focus in academia on the business values of efficiency, usefulness, and market forces that have begun to dictate a university's success, thus furthering the need for collaboration among the entire team. As the participants discussed, the institutional cultural hierarchy gets in the way of making decisions and hinders overall marketing initiatives.

All study participants spoke about educating their respective campus constituencies. One participant shared the perception that everyone thinks he or she knows marketing and is an expert in marketing. Because of this cultural challenge, some participants talked about their internal departments and how educating them about the types of students they are trying to attract is sometimes a challenge. One participant discussed how educating prospective students and their parents about the net price of tuition and not just the scholarship amount would be very helpful to the price conversation. Others discussed having large, diverse councils that help to share the information across campus.

Educating the campus toward having measurable, data-driven goals. Several participants discussed how marketing has changed in higher education over the years and how more synergies are developing among departments under inclusive leadership. One participant shared that it is important to get everybody onboard with the particular program and to educate them on what success looks like so that the team can be sure it achieves the goal. McCully and McDaniel (2007) pointed out that successful organizations need strategies that leverage information for strategic advantage using real-time collaboration that facilitates shared situational awareness. Participants discussed having measurable, data-driven goals around topics such as private support, with the vast majority discussing marketing goals for recruitment and retention efforts. Participants' lived experience of setting clear goals around new program development and ways to attract new students into those programs aligns with the research of Vargo et al. (2008) by developing the discussion of a value-creation model in which the benefit the customer experiences becomes the new value. Kokolus (2016) pointed out that marketers need to create customer niche markets, and that engaging constituents is a first step in identifying an unmet need. Many of the study participants discussed the outside negative perception surrounding higher education, and how trying to dismantle misinformation from outside stakeholders was difficult when concentrating efforts on enrollment growth. Participants attributed this unwanted attention to the demographic drop in the number of high-school students and the enrollment declines. Some participants discussed how they balance the recruitment marketing with the marketing that tells the story of why they are a viable option. As Goldsmith and Moutinho (2017) showed, successful organizations use coherent and consistent strategies to excel in creating long-term, profitable relationships with customers based on their ability to identify and to satisfy their needs and wants.

Increase synergies through educating and aligning the campus. Some participants saw educating the campus as part of the decision-making process, while others sat on various councils or the cabinet. When discussing what helps with a successful niche marketing effort, the vast majority of participants mentioned group buy-in or collaboration with various advisory groups or councils. When discussing departmental synergies and aligning the institution, participants were quick to share the successful synergies they have found since their department realigned with other departments to break down silos. Some participants discussed their roles as strategic partners. Others talked about their collaborative approaches to leadership.

Inclusive and collaborative leadership approach. Many of the participants mentioned their perceptions that marketing initiatives will not work if leaders micromanage and stifle the creativity of the team. Participant H stated that he did not limit the staff, rather encouraging them to try new things and to succeed, thus allowing them to grow professionally. Based on the participants' perceptions, educating, aligning, and energizing the institution requires a clear understanding of who the institution is trying to attract and how the team will work collectively and collaboratively to share the responsibility of developing a niche in the highly competitive higher education landscape. As Rohan and Boker (2011) have suggested, universities will need to differentiate themselves in an effort to succeed.

Significance of budgetary and resource constraints. Each of the nine study participants spoke about the budgetary constraints at the institution and the effect of the constraints on marketing initiatives. All participants explained in their own words how the constraints on the budget hamper current and future marketing initiatives. All participants understood that the budget allocation is tied to overall enrollment. They understand they are enrollment-driven in an area with declining demographics that aligns with Grawe's (2018) research. Participant I shared that as an enrollment-driven institution in the Northeast part of the United States, it is important to keep sort of a skeptical eye on emerging technologies and emerging platforms to make sure the institution stays informed of what is out there. The participant shared that it was equally important to make sure that the technology budget is adequate and that it is not cut. In a highly competitive, rapidly changing environment the need to invest in technology and data analytics is upon us. The higher education environment is enrollment-driven, and the enrollment demographic in Pennsylvania is shrinking. As Vriens and Kidd (2014) affirmed, utilizing technology in a more effective and efficient manner allows for the use of metric-driven and data-driven initiatives that can show a return on investment.

What Strategies and Initiatives Do Higher Education Marketing Leaders Perceive as Effective?

The nine participants described various strategies and initiatives they use in the higher education environment. Many of the participants focused on what the consumer wants as an important aspect of niche marketing.

Marketing what students want and need. Participant E concisely summarized the consumer wants topic by sharing that it was an effective marketing strategy to have relevant programs at affordable prices. Participant E mentioned that these two elements go a long way towards meeting the student's wants. McCully and McDaniel (2007) expressed a clear understanding of how to show the benefits of a higher education meeting the student's needs and continuing to meet new market demands.

When discussing what helps to market niche programs, many participants stated that they have a great deal of success with digital marketing by establishing the overall picture of the programs and then fostering group buy-in to help them to understand where they need to improve. Other participants mentioned that they utilize tools such as program questionnaires to develop the who, what, where and why questions and to gain a better sense of what the marketing goal is. The goal of the questionnaire process is to determine what makes the program unique so that institutions can develop a multimodal plan. Last, certain participants mentioned the use of developed personas of students from different subpopulations such as transfers, first generation, international, and military and that it was effective to market in a way that speaks to these personas. The participants explained that they use modeling to develop student personas to determine better how to personalize the communications for the particular audience or demographic they are looking to attract.

Niche marketing for specific programs. Creating a niche market for an institution of higher education requires sufficient nimbleness to adjust the curriculum to the ever-changing demands of the job market (McKiernan & Purg, 2014). This means moving past the typical bureaucratic structures as seen in the *Institutional Hierarchy* section of this study. As Ermler (2015) stated, the new shelf-life in higher education is short.

When discussing specific programs and what the participants' perceptions were towards what makes a successful niche, Participant A discussed a particular certification program and the marketing initiative it used, stating that there has been a great deal of success with digital advertising around the program. Participant A further defined the success of the program, stating that there has been a 700% jump in the number of inquiries.

The participants noted that there are times when they employ external firms to provide support in areas that the universities cannot manage with their own teams. These services range from branding initiatives to analytic services that help the marketing team to reach outside their normal abilities and capacities.

Use of data and analytics. According to Vriens and Kidd (2014), marketers of the future will use advanced analytics and big data to help to drive profits. The study participants' perceptions were that the marketing environment of today is also using advanced analytics and data to help drive decisions. The participants mentioned the use of data dashboards and analytics to help to drive marketing decisions that are tied to benchmarks and that show a return on investment. Numerous participants mentioned that utilizing data in this way helps them to understand what the audience wants. Many participants also mentioned that the data allow them to determine where to market based on audience reach. Several participants credit working with an outside firm for these efforts. A few participants mentioned having a content management system that ties into their metrics dashboard. Regardless of how the participants used the data and analytics, every participant mentioned the importance of using data.

Having access to good data. Participant E addressed using data to understand what the audience needs, saying that as a marketing leader, you have to understand what your audience wants. Furthermore, it is important to understand the analytics that go along with what the audience wants. Participant H shared about working with an outside firm, stating that the institution uses a dashboard that an outside firm created so that the team can look at the analytics to help to assess marketing initiatives.

Use of external firms. It is important to note that all nine study participants mentioned that they partner with an outside firm. Certain participants mentioned that they utilize the firm to provide guidance to their administration regarding tuition structuring. Others discussed how they use firms for distributing their digital ads because of the time and level of expertise such an activity requires. Participants often mentioned utilizing a firm currently or in the recent past to help to launch a campaign because of the volume of work a campaign requires. Participant F works with agencies like partners because they know the correct tools for telling the story to the right audience. The use of external firms varied by purpose across the nine participants. Some participants used the firm to provide analytics and various data sets, some used the firm to help to brand the institution, and some used the firm for various marketing services. Participant I shared that she gets an enormous amount of data from different vendors to help to inform strategies. The participant shared that the internal team forms the tactics. Participant G stated that her institution uses platforms that can "mesh data" with their internal CRM data. The one thing that is consistent across the participants is that they use external firms to support initiatives that the universities cannot provide in house.

Using data and technology differently to help to grow enrollment. The participants mentioned that a culture shift had to continue to get the various constituents thinking about how to embrace the use of analytics. Participant D shared how using analytics has been a bit of a shift in culture to get the team ready to think more about analytics and to pay attention to what the data are saying. Many of the participants shared that they were working to identify and address specific segments of the population, whether it be a geographic location, commuter students, or those interested in increasing online offerings. Other participants mentioned using data to look at broader regions and the impact of marketing to different populations outside Pennsylvania.

Certain participants, like Participant E, mentioned the cultural aspects of using data differently, having faculty willingness to be flexible, and having the forethought to create the academic programs the workforce needs. Participant H added that the expectation from the audience now is that everything that you do when you reach out to an audience needs to be personalized and relevant to it.

The participants' perceptions about the shift in technology and the use of analytics and modeling ties into what Gordon and Perrey (2015) discussed as the marketing environment of the future. The higher education environment must begin to adapt and adjust resources to align marketing efforts that can show a return and that meet the needs of the current demographics.

How Do Higher Education Marketing Leaders Perceive the Effect of the University's Culture on Marketing Initiatives?

Institutional cultures varied among participants and among the various institutions that they represent. Although each participant expressed these cultural challenges in a different manner, the participants overwhelmingly agreed that institutional culture can have an impact on the marketing initiatives of the institution. The institutional hierarchy information from the participants shows that the vast majority of participants have a divisional hierarchy that exists much like the typical university structure. Regardless of title, only three of the nine participants directly supervised all the people in their department or division. The three participants were a director, an associate vice president, and a vice president.

Slow to meet changing demographics. The participants held multiple perceptions on why their institutions were slow to meet the needs and demands of the changing demographics. Some participants believed that the marketing office was rather new to the institution or that the office only came about after the institution experienced enrollment declines. Participants who mentioned having a rather new office mentioned that prior to the existence of the marketing office, most efforts were uncoordinated and unsuccessful, because they lacked the overall understanding of how to market and set measurable goals. With the demographic shift and the declining population, those participants perceived the increased importance of the work their areas produced. Participant A showed that his institution is slow to meet the needs of the changing demographics because culturally, the team thinks the institution can enroll students based on historical reputation alone.

Telling the story of the institution is key to differentiating the institution. The participants' perceptions of the importance of strategically planning initiatives and moving quickly towards maintaining or creating a niche with a demographic focus illustrates the important of differentiating the institution.

Significance of telling the story. The researcher asked the study participants what meaning telling the story holds in the marketing environment. Each participant's response shows how important this aspect is in the higher education marketing environment. Some participants discussed the emotional connection that comes from telling the story of the institution. The participants all discussed the concept of telling the story of student success. They discussed highlighting a particular program and then identifying a student who fits the storyline by going through the program and finding a job in a desired field. Multiple participants described telling the story of the institution through the lens of building the brand and discussing the historical significance of the institution. The participants' overall perception on telling the story of the institution was that the story must be relevant and it must be meaningful to the audience in a way that informs and stirs action on behalf of the person who is receiving the message.

Public awareness is key to an institution being able to embrace and create a successful niche market (Brown, 1995). Without the ability to tell the story of the institution properly, it is possible to run into difficulty in showing the unique characteristics of the institution.

Implications

This study revealed that marketing leaders in higher education in the state of Pennsylvania are dealing with a shrinking demographic of college-bound applicants. This perception of the participants aligns with Grawe's (2018) estimates that student enrollment for the state will get smaller. The results of this study also indicate that the participants are aware of the increased use of data and data analytics to drive marketing decision making. The results of this study aligned with the research of Goldsmith and Moutinho (2017), Kokolus (2016), Lamb et al. (2012), McKinsey and Company (2015), Vermeulen (2015), and Vriens and Kidd (2014). The study at hand corroborated the research of Kokolus (2016) and Goldsmith and Moutinho (2017) by identifying that niche market methods, such as utilizing technology and engaging constituents to identify their unmet needs, can assist an institution in differentiating itself from its competitors by creating a niche program to service the unmet needs of the students.

Implication #1

Leaders in the higher education space could begin to explore how to remove the hierarchical structures within their institutions and they could explore how teams can work collectively and collaboratively to share the responsibility of developing a niche program in the highly competitive higher education landscape. Almost all (8 of 9) participants mentioned niche marketing as marketing for a specific program or demographic. Developing a niche requires sufficient nimbleness to adjust the curriculum to the ever-changing demands of the job market (McKiernan & Purg, 2014). As the participants shared, changing structures to make the institution nimble will require group buy-in and collaboration. Both of these characteristics occur in a shared leadership environment (Pearce & Conger, 2003). Freund (2017) explained that the concept of shared leadership arises from the need to navigate the complex pressures of traditional bureaucratic organizational structures. Turning these structures into a more inclusive collaborative organization may lead to a more successful niche market initiative.

Implication #2

In a highly competitive, rapidly changing environment, the need to invest in technology and data analytics is upon us (Gordon & Perrey, 2015). The higher education environment is enrollment-driven, and the enrollment demographic in Pennsylvania is shrinking (Grawe, 2018). As Participant D stated, "We use[d] everything from audience engagement to clicks and shares and audience demographics to make sure we were indeed reaching the intended audience." Utilizing technology in a more effective and efficient manner allows for the use of metric-driven and data-driven initiatives that can show a return on investment. As Participant H's experience showed, "under each initiative is a series of KPIs and direct metrics.… That's how I am measured on my work." The participants' perceptions of the shift in technology and the use of analytics and modeling ties into what Gordon and Perrey (2015) discussed as the marketing environment of the future. As the participants' experiences have shown, the financial constraints surrounding the higher education environment are real, and institutions must adapt and adjust resources to develop marketing efforts that can show a return on investment and that meet the needs of the current demographics.

Recommendations for Action

Recommendation #1 – Expand the Use of Data and Data Analytics in Marketing Efforts

The phenomenon the study participants experienced revealed some use of data analytics. However, all participants felt that enhancing the use of data and data analytics would be beneficial to marketing efforts focused on intentionally growing enrollment. The literature shows that predictive analytics uses data from the past to help to predict future events, actions, or behaviors. Predictive analytics uses variables that researchers can measure and analyze to predict the likely behavior of individuals (SAS Institute, 2019). According to Zimmerman (2019), "universities can use predictive analytics models to help with several agendas, from improving recruitment and retention to meeting students' needs." A number of participants discussed the use of a CRM system in their responses to questions relating to the use of data and data analytics. Reinartz and Venkatesan (2014), in the *Harvard Business Review*, suggested that the use of CRM modeling makes a very strong case for exploring avenues for tracking customer attributes. Their research points to a particular company's use of a CRM and how it achieved a 300% return rate on a one-million-dollar investment by rebalancing resources across the internal customer tiers using the knowledge it gained through adjusting its CRM strategies (Reinartz & Venkatesan, 2014). By analyzing the relationships between customer attitudes, behaviors, and demographics, the company was able to express the customer's attitude as a derivative of the observable factors: a female customer who is X years old and does Y will have attitude Z (Reinartz & Venkatesan, 2014). Certain participants in this study discussed beginning to use such predictive modeling in their marketing efforts to attract new students. For example, Participant H discussed the use of the institution's CRM system and how that system worked in tandem with other metrics and dashboards to deliver decision-rich data. As McCarthy (2014) stated, “predictive analytics has the power to change what organizations do and how they do it.” He further stated, “many companies are equipped with the right technology, but most lack the organizational capacity to take full advantage of predictive analytic[s].” The participants in this study all discussed using external firms to help with marketing initiatives. One might ask, “what happens if we redirect our funds from using external firms to building capacity internally?” The researcher recommends that institutions support initiatives and provide resources to allow for the robust use of data and data analytics throughout the various processes and marketing initiatives that support enrollment growth.

Recommendation #2 – Expand Reach through Focused Niche Programs

Creating a niche market for an institution of higher education requires sufficient nimbleness to adjust the curriculum to the ever-changing demands of the job market (McKiernan & Purg, 2014). This means moving past the typical bureaucratic structures the *Institutional Hierarchy* section of this study described. As Ermler (2015) stated, the new shelf-life in higher education is short. The researcher asked each study participant for a definition of niche marketing. Participant A discussed honing in on specific demographic groups and looking at how to be strategic about developing a campaign that is specific to the target audience. Participant B stated that niche marketing encompassed marketing a specific program that will show a return on investment for the university. Participants C and H discussed niche marketing as not “being everything to everyone,” but rather maintaining a focus on a particular audience or segment.

Participants E and F suggested that creating a niche required a program-specific marketing approach. All five participants mentioned either a specific program or a demographic in their responses to the niche marketing question. The research of Liu-Farrer (2011) developed by Rohan and Boker (2011) highlighted the idea that universities can embrace many different initiatives that focus on creating a niche market. The overwhelming majority of the study participants perceived niche marketing in higher education as program focused. As research from marketing-school.org suggests, to create a successful niche market, the institution must look towards a program that has heavy demand, high income potential, and light competition. This study showed that niche marketing in higher education focuses on intentional methods that help marketers to look at people for who they are, how they spend their time, and how they utilize technology in an effort to tailor their messages and to engage the audience.

The participants' lived experience suggested that the definition of a niche in higher education oftentimes depends on the needs of a specific program or demographic group. Meshing the ability to tell the institutional story with a niche program the institution offers can begin to create a niche market in the higher educational environment.

Recommendation #3 – Ready the Team for Enrollment Success

In an effort to understand the participants' perceptions about leadership better, the researcher asked them what characteristics someone in their position should avoid. The responses varied, but the general theme was the same. The participants all agreed that micromanaging and stifling the creativity of the team was the number one thing for a leader to avoid. Participant H summarized the overall leadership theme, stating, "you limit your staff professionally by not giving them the freedom to stretch their legs and kind of gain experiences of various areas." This overall theme plays into shared leadership theory (Pearce and Conger, 2003), and it has links with multiple aspects of team effectiveness, including productivity, team satisfaction, and decision-making quality. Leaders should avoid hindering the marketing efforts through micromanagement.

Recommendation #4 – Incorporate an Inclusive Leadership Approach to Niche Marketing Campus-Wide

This study exposed the importance of campus collaboration when undertaking a niche marketing initiative. Participants who perceived that their leadership team was inclusive also perceived that their marketing initiatives were producing positive results. The research of Dow (2008) and McCully and McDaniel (2007) showed the need for collaboration among the entire team. The researcher recommends that institutional leaders adopt a campus-wide, inclusive approach when implementing a niche marketing strategy focused on increasing enrollment. Fostering group buy-in was a consistent theme throughout many of the participants' lived experiences, and as such, proper attention should go to the leadership approach in use when trying to differentiate the institution through niche marketing strategies.

Recommendations for Further Study

This study has supplemented existing literature regarding marketing in the higher education environment. However, additional research could be valuable for higher education campus leaders, educational state officials, and campus constituents in understanding the experiences of higher education marketing leaders.

Recommendation #1 – Expand the Study to Include Non-Pennsylvania Marketing Leaders

The study focused on higher education institutions in the state of Pennsylvania and it thus had a small sample size. The findings may not necessarily be generalizable to the broad range of marketing leaders' experiences in higher education. Non-Pennsylvanian marketing leaders in higher education may have different experiences and perceptions regarding their lived experiences with niche marketing initiatives. As a result, the researcher recommends expanding the study to include marketing leaders outside the state of Pennsylvania.

Recommendation #2 – Expand the Study to Incorporate Quantitative Data on Enrollments

Another recommendation is to incorporate quantitative data surrounding enrollment numbers into the study. The participants shared what they perceived as the current enrollment numbers for their respective institutions. Perhaps researchers could study and research these enrollment numbers to try to draw further correlations between the niche marketing initiatives and the actual enrollment data. Understanding the effectiveness of these marketing initiatives on increasing enrollment may help to promote the respective institutions' long-term financial sustainability and encourage a more dramatic shift in the way colleges and universities market towards prospective students.

Recommendation #3 – Identify the Extent to which Enrollment Modeling Helps to Increase Enrollments

Multiple participants mentioned using personas or modeling prospective students as an effective way to increase student enrollment. This study did not examine whether enrollment modeling through personas or demographic modeling was an effective way of increasing student enrollment. Such research would help university marketing leaders to refine the plethora of technology-enabled platforms in use in the higher education space. Researchers should conduct further studies to determine the effectiveness of these various marketing initiatives on increasing student enrollment.

Recommendation #4 – Narrow the Study to Focus on Certain Data Tools and Their Perceived Effects on Increasing Enrollments

Researchers could also narrow this study by exploring certain data tools that higher education marketing leaders use in effective initiatives to increase enrollment. The study at hand did not measure the effectiveness of the various data-enabled platforms and tools that the various participants utilized or discussed. Perhaps further studies could examine the effectiveness of the various technology-enabled platforms and tools for their adeptness in marketing to students to increase student enrollment.

Recommendation #5 – Conduct a Case Study of an Institution from a Top-to-Bottom Perspective

This study focused on the lived experiences of higher education marketing leaders in the state of Pennsylvania. The study at hand did not examine a particular institution, utilizing a top-to-bottom approach towards analyzing the results of actual marketing initiatives. The researcher recommends conducting a case study of a particular institution. This research could add value to the existing body of research and it could perhaps enhance the significance of niche marketing efforts in higher education.

Recommendation #6 – Conduct a Case Study on the Marketing Approach for Public-Private Partnership Initiatives

As public-private partnerships become more common in the higher education space, incorporating a niche marketing approach to these initiatives could perhaps add significant value to such endeavors. As Probst (2016) discussed in his podcast, public-private partnerships are on the rise, “[In] the last [few] decades, we have seen … public and private actors more collaboratively addressing societal challenges that one of them alone cannot solve.” The researcher recommends conducting a case study at an institution that has engaged in a successful public-private partnership to help to uncover the marketing approach it used with such an initiative.

Recommendation #7 – Conduct a Case Study of an Institution with Consistent Enrollment Growth to Understand the Leadership Approach Further

This study relied on the participants' perceptions regarding enrollment data at their respective institutions. The researcher recommends conducting a case study at an institution that has experienced consistent enrollment growth to help to understand the leadership traits that are prevalent at the institution further. This study explored the participants' perceptions surrounding what leadership traits to avoid and how collaboration was an effective way to approach a niche marketing initiative; however, a study focused on the leadership approach at an institution that has consistently seen enrollment growth could add value to the body of research.

Recommendation #8 – Conduct a Study on Students' Perspectives of the Effect of Institutional Marketing on Selecting an Institution

This study explored the importance of intentionally marketing a specific program or marketing to a specific demographic. The researcher recommends conducting a study from the student's perspective to examine the effect of marketing initiatives on the student's decision to choose an institution. Conducting a study that examines the student's perspective on marketing initiatives and the effectiveness of such strategies on student choice has the potential to advance the existing body of literature significantly.

Conclusion

Existing research has demonstrated how niche marketing can positively impact how organizations engage with the client to meet the unmet wants and needs of the consumer. The marketing model for higher education is shifting away from the traditional output of the organization. Due to the declining number of high-school graduates, institutions are best served embracing a *value-creation* model in which the *benefit* the customer experiences is the new value

(Vargo et al., 2008). This qualitative, phenomenological study is significant, because studies relating to the lived experiences of marketing leaders in the higher education space are scare. The purpose of this study was to examine perceptions of select niche market initiatives by university marketing decision makers through their lived experiences of niche marketing. The study further examined the perceptions of these leaders through specific strategies they used and their perceptions of how effective the initiatives were in increasing enrollment. As McCarthy (2014) stated, high-performing organizations leverage the power of data analytics. By leveraging this technology, these organization become agile and fast at adapting to change. The results of this study revealed that marketing leaders have begun to embrace technology-enabled marketing tools and data analytics to help to guide their marketing initiatives. Many of these marketing leaders have to navigate internally complex bureaucratic structures to see initiatives through to fruition. Participants shared that the financial constraints on their institutions hamper their marketing initiatives, but participants clearly understood that budgets in the current environment are enrollment-driven.

Although participants' experiences with data-enabled technology in marketing initiatives were mostly positive, the study revealed that some participants faced barriers to success. They perceived turnover in institutional leadership and leaders not embracing an inclusive and collaborative approach as hindering niche marketing efforts at an institutional level. Fostering an environment of open communication and collaboration can aid institutions in their niche marketing initiatives. This qualitative, phenomenological study demonstrated that niche marketing in higher education could serve as a valuable strategy when helping to grow enrollment at an institution of higher education.

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Appendix A

Qualifying Questionnaire for the Research Study

1. What is your title?
2. How many direct reports do you manage?

    □ 0-2 people

    □ 3-5 people

    □ 6-9 people

    □ 10 or more people

3. How many people in your entire department?

    □ 0-2 people

    □ 3-5 people

    □ 6-9 people

    □ 10 or more people

4. What is your institution's Carnegie classification?

    □ Doctorate-Granting University

    □ Master's College and University

    □ Baccalaureate College

    □ Associates College

    □ Special Focus Institution

    □ Tribal College

    □ Not Classified

5. Would you be willing to participate in a follow-up 45-60 minute interview? □ Yes □ No

Appendix B

Interview Structure for the Research Study

Leadership and Culture

1. Please describe what you do at your university.
2. What challenges do you perceive in your current marketing environment?
3. What leadership characteristics and practices do you believe are necessary to lead a marketing initiative at your institution?
4. What leadership behaviors should someone in your position avoid?
5. What economic factors do you perceive affect your ability to market the university?
6. What university cultural factors do you perceive affect marketing at the institution?

Demographics

7. How many years have you worked in higher education? What is your career and educational background?
8. What is the approximate size of your marketing department budget? What is the approximate size of the overall university budget?
9. How long (in years) have you been leading the marketing effort at an institution of higher education?
10. Approximately how many students were enrolled at your institution when you began leading the marketing effort?
11. Approximately how many students are enrolled at your institution today?
12. How do you perceive demographic factors affecting your marketing initiatives?

Technology

13. Describe the level and type of technological expertise you think is necessary to lead a marketing initiative at your institution.
14. How do you use technology such as data analytics to aid in various marketing initiatives?
15. How do you use forecasting or modeling to predict behavior?
16. What tools do you use to measure a successful marketing initiative?
17. What examples of data or evidence do you have on the effectiveness of your marketing strategies?

Marketing

18. What is your definition of niche marketing?
19. What does the process for determining a marketing initiative look like? Can you walk me through the decision making process and who would be involved?
20. Have there been deliberate efforts to improve enrollments through marketing initiatives here?
21. Has the process always worked like this? If marketing initiatives have changed, can you tell me when that happened and how it went?
22. Do you find that consumer behavior has changed, and if so how?
23. What meaning does the story hold in the marketing environment?
24. Briefly describe or give examples of marketing initiatives currently under way at your institution.
25. How do you perceive the effect of marketing strategies on enrollment at your institution?
26. Do you have any sample marketing material of which you are particularly proud? May I have a copy?

27. Do you have any additional information would you like to share about your marketing strategies and initiatives?
28. Would it be okay for me to call or e-mail you if I have additional questions as the study progresses?