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Admissions Directors’ Understanding Of The Enrollment Crisis At New England Catholic Colleges

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ADMISSIONS DIRECTORS' UNDERSTANDING OF THE ENROLLMENT CRISIS AT NEW ENGLAND CATHOLIC COLLEGES

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this interpretative phenomenological analysis study was to learn and describe college admissions directors' understanding of declining high school graduate numbers through 2030 and the implications for new student recruitment. The eight study participants represented eight New England Catholic colleges or universities with a full-time undergraduate enrollment under 3,600 and an acceptance rate of 60% or higher. Participants took part in semi-structured interviews, providing answers to open-ended questions that addressed the study's two research questions: What is admission directors' level of understanding about the impending 2020–2030 enrollment crisis at small, less-selective, private Catholic colleges and universities in New England? and What is the role of admissions directors at small, less-selective, private Catholic colleges and universities in New England in the institutional response to the enrollment crisis?

Data analysis revealed three themes: level of understanding of impending enrollment crisis, enrollment crisis effect on institutional sustainability, and role of admissions directors and sphere of influence. Findings showed that all participants expressed similar, if not identical, concerns regarding the impending enrollment crisis with an uneven depth of knowledge. The study also showed that none of the 8 admissions directors felt their institution was at immediate risk of closing, despite the impending enrollment crisis. Also, their sphere of influence on their campuses in the institutional response to the enrollment crisis is limited, but heavily depended upon.

Keywords:

admissions directors, declining high school graduates, birth dearth, less-selective, Catholic colleges

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Change and change management are well documented research topics across all industries (Beer, Eisenstat, & Spector, 2011; Fullan, 2001; Sirkin, Keenan, & Jackson, 2011). Within higher education, the prevalence of outside influences requires institutions to be nimble and change rapidly to be competitive, which are crucial responses for longevity and institutional survival (EY Parthenon Education Practice [EY Parthenon], 2016; Selingo, 2013). A concern to all higher education institutions is that, from the mid-2020s and continuing throughout the decade, there will be a sharp decline in the number of students graduating high school, often called the birth dearth[1], requiring all institutions to evaluate their admissions and recruitment practices (Eide, 2019; Grawe, 2018; Horn, 2018). The nationwide drop in potential college students will be even more pronounced in the Northeastern United States, where the predicted 2020 to 2030 decline in New England is 11% to 22% (Grawe, 2018).

The population change is thus more likely to affect tuition-dependent, nonprofit, private U.S. Northeast regional institutions with low selectivity, resulting in financial challenges that could contribute to an institution's eventual demise (Carey, 2014; Damiano, 2019; Grawe, 2018; Zemsky, Shaman, & Campbell Balridge, 2020). According to *Education Dive*, 86 U.S. higher education institutions have closed or merged since 2016 (Busta, 2018). Change, and managing change, in higher education are more important than ever not only to provide a compelling

[1] The "birth dearth" is the lasting effect of the United States' economic recession of 2008 where couples did not just put off having children until after the financial crisis was over; they did not have children at all (Grawe, 2018).

educational environment but to ensure sustainability in light of the impending enrollment crisis (McCaffery, 2019; Newman, Courturier, & Scurry, 2004; Selingo, 2013).

Simultaneous with the demographic shift of declining high school graduates are the effects of students' changing expectations of the college educational experience combined with the increased concern of student debt, shifting the focus from institutional attributes to the perceived value of the college (Fishman, Nguyen, Acosta & Clark, 2019; Gardner, 2019; Jaschik, 2018b; Kelderman, 2019; Newman et al., 2004). Generation Z (Gen Z) students—those born between 1995 and 2010—experienced the September 11, 2001, terrorist attack and the economic crash of 2008, resulting in intermittently high unemployment and ongoing overseas wars (Seemiller & Grace, 2106). Further, Gen Z is the first to experience the completely accessible world via technology. Gen Z students view a college education as necessary for their future and an educated society as ideal; however, these students are often focused on their "passion" as opposed to a job (McGee, 2015; Seemiller & Grace, 2016). Coupled with fewer students in the pipeline for the coming decades, higher education institutions must compete on expectations and value (Seemiller & Grace, 2016). According to a 2019 New American poll, members of Gen Z plan to obtain a college degree; however, 72% believe that higher education should change (Fishman et al., 2019).

To meet students' expectations, change will need to be both thoughtful and swift, as institutions no longer have the luxury of time to change in the face of declining numbers of high school graduates (Bransberger & Michelau, 2016; Grawe, 2018). Unfortunately, institutions of higher education tend to be slow in innovating and applying change (Christensen & Eyring, 2011; McCaffery, 2019; Newman et al., 2004). The looming effect of the birth dearth is driving higher education to reevaluate every aspect of its business (Grawe, 2018).

Critical in reevaluating what was once business as usual are the faculty, staff, and administration of an institution, as change, innovation, and strategic planning require input from all stakeholders (Buller, 2014; Curry, 1992; Fullan, 2001; Gardner, 2019; Kelderman, 2019; Toma, 2010). Researchers have introduced the term “loosely coupled” to describe organizations whose functions are connected yet independent (Glassman, 1973; Orton & Weick, 1990; Weick, 1976). Weick (1976) elaborated:

> People in organizations, including educational organizations, find themselves hard pressed either to find actual instances of those rational practices or to find rationalized practices whose outcomes have been as beneficent as predicted, or to feel that those rational occasions explain much of what goes on within the organization. Parts of some organizations are heavily rationalized but many parts also prove intractable to analysis through rational assumptions. (p. 1)

Despite governance structures, higher education, too, could be loosely coupled, indicating the impact of overall change strategy agreement on accomplishing goals set forth through strategic planning (Orton & Weick, 1990; Weick, 1976). As parts of the institutions work independently in a loosely coupled organization, agreement can be difficult to achieve (Glassman, 1973; Orton & Weick, 1990; Weick, 1976).

A single-campus, private, nonprofit, tuition-dependent institution is most at risk of closure due to enrollment concerns or financial complications (EY Parthenon, 2016; Zemsky et al., 2020). The institution must address not only the consumer and the enrolling student, but also the tolerance for change within the board of trustees or other governance structures (Association of Governing Boards, 2018). As noted by Olson (2009), shared governance "has come to connote two complementary and sometimes overlapping concepts: giving various groups of people a share in key decision-making processes, often through elected representation, and allowing certain groups to exercise primary responsibility for specific areas of decision making" (para. 10).

The leadership styles of campus administrators are important in executing successful change (Ahn, Adamson, & Dornbusch, 2004). Strategic planning and its success depend on thoughtful, careful, and capable leaders who have both short- and long-term visions (Newman et al., 2004). Employees who are averse and resistant to change can derail strategic innovation and implementation (Ahn et al., 2004; Kotter, 2010). Buller (2014) stressed that change in higher education can be difficult due to expressed or demonstrated resistance to change. As important as the change initiatives are, the role of the individual to help enact change is crucial to innovation and implementation (Kooli, 2019). Moreover, the administrators must endorse and become more comfortable with change, at minimum understanding its necessity and preventing it from impeding progress (Pucciarelli & Kaplan, 2016).

Integral to meeting the institutional goals while strategizing and managing change are individuals working in the areas of enrollment management and admissions (Phair, 2014). The chief enrollment officer (vice president for enrollment) and the chief admissions officer (director of admissions) work together using strategy and well-developed, data-driven plans to recruit (Phair, 2014). Although enrollment changes affect all campus factions to force change, admissions directors have the most significant impact and concern in recruiting and enrolling students (Black, 2004). Those most likely responsible for meeting institutional budget objectives at a small college are the director or dean of admissions along with the vice president for enrollment management and the chief finance officer (Lapovsky & McKeown-Moak, 1999).

Statement of the Problem

Change is rapidly and dramatically affecting small, private, tuition-dependent colleges and universities (Pucciarelli & Kaplan, 2016). Impacting the current climate of higher education are customer perceptions of the necessity and relevance of a 4-year college education, as well as the growing student loan debt crisis and the tolerance of prospective students to take on the debt (Jaschik, 2018b; Seemiller & Grace, 2016; Witteveen & Attewell, 2019). Also, there is a growing backlash against higher education for what some consider unnecessary excess driving up college costs and tuition (Desrochers, Lenihan, & Wellman, 2010; Woodhouse, 2015). After adjustment for inflation, undergraduate tuition, fees, and room, and board at private colleges and universities increased 24% percent from the 2006–2007 to 2016–2017 school years (NCES, 2019).

The most significant result of rising tuitions and changing demographics is the impact on enrollment and the ability of many private institutions to meet financial goals or budgets, depending on the success of achieving enrollment projections (Damiano, 2019). The National Association of College and University Business Officers (NACUBO, 2019) reported that, in 2018, private, nonprofit colleges were discounting gross tuition at a record-high 52.2% for first-time, full-time students. Accordingly, net tuition—what remains after applying need-based and merit-based money—is significantly reduced when institutions are giving back to the student more than half of every dollar received (NACUBO, 2019). Net tuition is the amount on which the institution budgets and functions, with some small, independent, tuition-dependent colleges putting nearly 60% toward salaries (Mitchell, 2018). Mitchell (2018) stated that, for these schools, “There is little or no discretion in the operating budget. For some of them, the financial aid discount rate now approaches seventy percent. Dorms will be full until the institution, desperate for revenue, closes, merges, or is acquired” (para. 6).

Across the United States, 11 small colleges have closed since 2018, five of them in two New England states: Massachusetts and Vermont (Jaschik, 2019a). Future closures could occur at institutions struggling with low endowments, financial issues, and low student enrollment, requiring all employees to understand the need for and demands of change and the speed with which change should occur (Eide, 2019). Remaining viable will require institutional change that could consist of restructuring of faculty workload, an early retirement incentive program, or eliminating majors and investing in new ones (Lindsay, 2018). Change could also include bolder initiatives such as merging institutions, as occurred between Marlboro College and Emerson College (Jaschik, 2019a).

A specific subset of higher education institutions facing these financial, enrollment, and sustainability challenges are small, private, regional Catholic schools (O’Loughlin, 2018). These institutions have the added dimension of struggling with their value, as fewer students are attending nonsecular institutions (Seltzer, 2019). Over the last decade, Catholic baptisms have declined 34% and enrollment at Catholic secondary schools has dropped six percent (Parrott, 2019). In addition, 21% of parents labeled the expense of Catholic higher education as a mitigating factor (Parrott, 2019). Given that Gen Z is price conscious and focused on value, lower enrollment at Catholic colleges is not surprising (Parrott, 2019; Seemiller & Grace, 2016).

Colleges are grappling with student and parent concerns related to the perceived value of a college education in light of the expense, coupled with declining numbers of high school graduates; as such, campus environments are fraught with challenges and change that require strong institutional leadership (Grawe, 2018; McCaffery, 2019; Selingo, 2013). Despite the importance of the role of admissions directors at small, less-selective, Catholic, tuition-dependent institutions in New England, there has not been a study of the interaction and interconnection between admissions directors' understanding of the declining high school markets and the strategic focus of institutional leadership for recruitment in higher education during these times of uncertainty.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) study was to research admissions directors' understanding of the birth dearth from the mid-2000s through mid-2020s and declining high school graduate numbers through 2030, and the implications for new student recruitment at small, private, less-selective, Catholic colleges and universities in New England. Also explored was the response of institutional leadership to address recruitment challenges for institutional survival and the role of admissions directors. The employees at the institutions studied are experiencing industry changes as some institutions in the region have closed quickly and unexpectedly (Busta, 2018; Damiano, 2019; Eide, 2019; Jaschik, 2019a; Wong, 2019). Also, as demographics continue to shift and consumer expectations evolve, further change is anticipated (Damiano, 2019). Factors such as shared governance with unions, departments, and divisions affect organizational climate and culture in higher education (Christensen & Eyring, 2011; McCaffery, 2019). These structures create accountability but can also impede swift progress toward change, depending on the individuals involved and their adherence to rules (McGee, 2015). Every institution is likely to have a different structure and some teams might not be aligned (Kretovics & Eckert, 2019).

Research Sites

The multiple sites in the study were small, less-selective, Catholic colleges or universities in New England with a total undergraduate enrollment under 3,600 and an acceptance rate of 60% or more (IPEDS, 2019). The represented institutions have the accreditation of the New England Commission of Higher Education (NECHE, 2019).

Research Questions

The essential questions in this research study were:

1. What is admissions directors' level of understanding about the impending 2020–2030 enrollment crisis at small, less-selective, private Catholic colleges and universities in New England?
2. What is the role of admissions directors at small, less-selective, private Catholic colleges and universities in New England in the institutional response to the enrollment crisis?

Conceptual and Theoretical Frameworks

Conceptual Framework

Employee engagement served as the conceptual framework for the study, specific to how employees are connected to their work and the institution and their understanding of leadership goals as well as how it impacts their work (Albrecht, 2010). Employees have different motivations; as such, it is essential to understand the motivating factors and how that affects engagement. Emmons (2007) highlighted that enjoyment in one's work has positive implications for the organization in terms of positive employee engagement.

Institutional alignment among thought leaders and change agents is necessary to transform and achieve intended goals (Head, 2009; Kotter, 2010). Culture is an important component of change management, as it impacts how others perceive change (Ulrik & Hasse, 2015). How employees feel about the work they do, how they think about themselves, and their ability to achieve the intended goals and outcomes are all part of institutional alignment (Head, 2009). Innovation is vital for the ongoing survival of small, tuition-dependent private colleges, and how employees participate, or resist is a critical component (Eaker, 2008; Gardner, 2019; Kirkman, Jones & Shapiro, 2000; Pucciarelli & Kaplan, 2016).

Theoretical Framework

The researcher utilized two theoretical frameworks for this study, expectancy theory (Vroom, 1964) and leader-member exchange theory (LMX; Northouse, 2016). The two theories complement each other regarding different aspects of employee motivation and the relationships between the leader and the follower or employee (Lunenburg, 2011; Northouse, 2016). For studying the impact of rapid and ongoing change, both theories provided structure to employees' commitment to goal achievement and the relationship between senior leadership and directors of admission.

Assumptions, Limitations, and Scope

The scope of the study was interviewing eight admissions directors at small, less-selective, tuition-dependent Catholic colleges and universities in New England. Assumptions of the research study were that the participants were genuinely interested in taking part in the study, were forthcoming in answering the questions, and were authentic in their responses.

Limitations of the study included using a purposive sampling method, the small number of participants selected, and the use of multiple sites for the research. The homogeneous purposive sampling method could limit the variety of participants and create researcher bias (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016). The small sample size could have also been a limitation, as there may not have been enough information collected to be substantive. Bias was also possible due to the researcher's professional connection to the field of higher education in New England.

Rationale and Significance

Understanding the individual experiences of change at the research sites could be useful to the campus leadership. Conclusions from semi structured interviews using open-ended questions provided insight on the enrollment crisis at the Catholic college or university and the impact of leadership and their decisions on the administrators. The significance of this study rests in understanding the human capital component of change management related to the human experience.

Definition of Terms

Admissions directors: Titles and responsibilities vary from institution to institution; thus, the admissions director might instead be titled the chief admissions officer. For this study, the admissions director is the department head who supervises a staff of counselors or recruiters and is responsible for recruitment and enrollment of new first-time, full-time undergraduate students. (Phair, 2014).

Chief enrollment management officer: The chief enrollment management officer is responsible for overseeing the department of admissions and the chief admissions officer, as well as creating coordinated efforts for recruitment and retention of students (Phair, 2014).

Employee engagement: The commitment of employees to the outcomes desired by the university indicates employee engagement (Harder, 2017; Kruse, 2015).

Enrollment management: The original structure of enrollment management is the alignment of strategy and marketing with new student recruitment (Maguire, 1976).

Expectancy theory: Vroom (1964) developed expectancy theory as a behavioral theory of motivation of followers.

Generation Z: Gen Z comprises individuals born between 1995 and 2010 (Seemiller & Grace, 2016).

Leader-member exchange: The leader-member exchange is based on the leader and follower dyadic relationship focused on in-groups and out-groups (Northouse, 2016).

Less selective: Institutions in this category of admission continue to admit students until meeting enrollment goals. Less selective is not an indication of the quality of the college or university (My College Guide, 2019).

Organizational culture: A shared set of expectations, values, philosophy, and experiences make up the organizational culture. The culture also incorporates unwritten rules that contribute to the expected behaviors of its members (Schein & Schein, 2016).

Tuition-dependent: Most of higher education institutions' operating revenue comes directly from tuition and fees, thus making them tuition-dependent (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2012).

Conclusion

This study was a means to understand the relationship and the experience of admissions directors with ongoing recruitment challenges and change at small, less-selective, Catholic colleges. Changes in the higher education environment are rapid and dramatically affecting small, private, tuition-dependent colleges and universities (Pucciarelli & Kaplan, 2016). Declining enrollment is having a significant and negative impact on college enrollments for the majority of institutions (EY Parthenon, 2016). As institutions respond to changing consumer needs and the challenges of declining enrollment, innovation becomes essential (Grawe, 2018; Seemiller & Grace, 2016). Grawe (2018) posited that an opportunity exists for strategic decision-making for long-term survival.

This constructivist IPA study was a means to discover the lived experience of college admissions directors regarding enrollment challenges at small, less-selective Catholic institutions in New England. Understanding the experiences of the individuals through semi-structured interviews provided insight into the impact of leadership and leadership decisions on admissions professionals as the impending enrollment crisis looms.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Changing demographics of traditional-age, college-going students in the United States is a cause for concern for higher education institutions, signifying an impending enrollment crisis at colleges and universities across the country (Grawe, 2018; Kelderman, 2019). Despite prior data existing indicating this enrollment trend stressor, attention to it has increased entering 2020 (Bransberger & Michelau, 2016; Grawe, 2018). This study centered on one of the harder-hit regions of the United States, specifically the Northeast, which is forecast to experience an 11% decline of high school graduates by 2030 (Bransberger & Michelau, 2016; Gardner, 2019).

To attract traditional-age students to college, institutions must differentiate themselves from competitor schools by creating distinct programs, majors, and experiences (Christensen & Eyring, 2011; Hanover Research, 2014; Selingo, 2013). Small, less-selective private colleges compete for the same first-year students and, in light of declining birth rates in much of the United States, the stakes are high for institutional sustainability (Barshay, 2018; Thompson, 2017; Zemsky et al., 2020).

As colleges and universities face enrollment challenges, campus leadership (presidents) are have the difficult tasks of change and change management, strategic planning, and innovating (Aponte, 2011; Christensen & Eyring, 2011; Selingo, 2013). Innovation and change require initial creativity and vision, and face scrutiny by campus stakeholders asked to implement change (Buller, 2014; Christensen & Eyring, 2011; Curry, 1992; Fullan, 2001; Toma, 2010). Campus presidents employ a leadership style to guide the institution and enact change (Ahn et al., 2004; Bass, 2008; Buller, 2014; Toma, 2010). The president's relationship with employees or followers, communication, and campus climate are important considerations in the reception to and execution of change (Boyer, 2016; Bradfield & Clark).

The Study Topic

The research in this literature review centered on change management in higher education with attention paid to leadership styles, as well as the approach of those leaders to admissions directors in the context of the impending enrollment crisis in New England. Strategic planning also merited consideration regarding new initiatives and the leaders' impact on followers (Head, 2009; Toma, 2010). Innovating and forcing change affects employees and their ability to fully understand the need for change, their willingness to change, and the creation of supporting structures needed to innovate successfully (Albrecht, 2010; Curry, 1992). Resistance to change is common, posing a challenge for leaders who need to determine the best way to appeal to followers amid high stakes related to institutional survival (Balwant, 2019; Bryant, Coombs, & Pazio, 2014; Kotter, 2010; Newman et al., 2004).

The Context

The literature review that follows presents an evaluation and synthesis of prior scholarship related to the impending enrollment crisis and enrollment management. The literature reviewed also addresses structural components of change, change management, and strategic planning in higher education. Additionally, leadership theories, followers (employees), employee engagement, communication, and the impact on institutional survival and sustainability are also reviewed.

The Significance

This research is important as it provides campus leaders with insight into the depth of admissions directors' understanding of the current landscape of the enrollment crisis. Additional information pertains to how admissions directors view their participation and contributions to their institutions, as the institutions change. Uncertainty persists among faculty, staff, and administration, as each segment struggles to understand its role in change and its imperative nature during challenging enrollment times (McCaffery, 2019).

The Problem Statement

Change is rapidly and dramatically affecting small, private, tuition-dependent colleges and universities (Pucciarelli & Kaplan, 2016). Changing demographics of traditional-age students, as well as the decline of available students to recruit, is a challenge facing higher education (Bransberger & Michelau, 2016; Grawe, 2018). The current climate of higher education incorporates customer perception of both the necessity and relevance of a college education as well as the growing student loan debt crisis and the tolerance of prospective students to take on the debt (Jaschik, 2018b; Witteveen & Attewell, 2019).

Facing these challenges are small, private, less-selective, regional institutions with religious affiliations struggling with a value proposition, as fewer students are attending nonsecular institutions (Seltzer, 2019). Despite the importance of the role of admissions directors at small, less-selective, Catholic, tuition-dependent institutions, there is a gap in the literature regarding the impact of decisions by institutional leadership to address the enrollment crisis and specifically how these decisions impact admissions directors.

The Organization

The review of the literature begins with a historical background related to the impending enrollment crisis in higher education, enrollment management, change, change management, and leaders and followers. Most of the literature reviewed is current, published within the past 10 years. Books, articles, scholarly, peer-reviewed journal articles and research, and dissertations received consideration.

Conceptual Framework

Employee engagement refers to workers' commitment and ability to perform in multifaceted and multidimensional ways (Biggs, Brough, & Barbour, 2014; Kahn, 1990). Rich, Lepine, and Crawford (2010) described Kahn's (1990) work as the need to "develop theory that positions engagement as a key mechanism explaining relationships and organizational factors and job performance" (p. 617). Practices that elicit and promote engagement among employees can improve and enhance performance or citizenship within an organization (Rich et al., 2010). Trust and relationships with leaders and followers are inherent in employee engagement (Albrecht, 2010; Balwant, 2019; Kahn, 1990; Mishra, Boynton & Mishra, 2014). Kohut (2010) identified the employee who remains after substantial change as a "survivor," theorizing that profound change had taken place and impacted the employee. It is critical that employees both embrace change and feel empowered to enact change at their levels, working with peers to move the initiative forward (Schedin, 2018a).

Topical Research

The misalignment between an institution and its ethos places senior leadership at odds with employees, thus unable to successfully innovate and achieve intended results (Head, 2009;

Kotter, 2010). Ulrik and Hasse (2010) asserted that culture—in the case of this study, a university campus—is a critical component of managing change. Innovation is necessary for the survival of small, private institutions, with successful change management being a vital component (Eaker, 2008; Hanover Research, 2014). The small, “invisible” private institutions have a long history of working hard for their market share (Astin & Lee, 1971; Carey, 2014).

Kirkman et al. (2000) studied the resistance of work teams concerning trust and accountability. Departments, academic divisions, and other organizational structures within the higher education environment could appear in the same light as work teams. The teams’ resistance is not against each other as individuals but against concepts and the need to change what they do or to integrate something new into their usual and preferred existence in the workplace (Kirkman et al., 2000; Tagg, 2012). In addition, Kegan and Lahey (2001) posited that often those who are most interested in the success of a program are the same ones preventing progress because of unrecognized competing commitments creating immunity to change.

Theoretical Framework

Expectancy theory (Vroom, 1964) and LMX provided the theoretical framework to research the perspectives of change by employees regarding themselves as change agents in small, private, less-selective, Catholic colleges or universities. Together, the two frameworks unite different aspects of employee motivation and the relationships between leader and follower (Lunenburg, 2011; Northouse, 2016; Schedin, 2018a, 2018b). The study benefited from both theories because, in motivation, expectancy theory aligns with employee commitment to goal achievement (Schedin, 2018b). Likewise, LMX focuses on in-groups and out-groups with goal accomplishment and the role of ‘expectancy’ and ‘valence’ of the employee and meaningful change (Gaffney, 2018; Wheeler, 1983).

Expectancy Theory

Vroom developed expectancy theory in 1964 as a behavioral theory of motivation of the followers. Lunenburg (2011) asserted that, in essence, if people are motivated and convinced that effort leads to strong output or performance, then that good performance will lead to reward. Northouse (2016) noted that expectancy theory is specifically about the follower.

Mitchell (1982) expanded upon and explored motivation, job satisfaction, and expectancy theory. Mitchell identified goal-setting as key, finding people will work harder with established goals than without stated objectives. Mitchell and Nebeker (1973) wrote specifically about academic performance and expectancy theory among business students. Klein (1990) wrote of work motivation and followed with research on goal-setting and expectancy theory. In 1999, Klein, Wesson, Hollenbeck, and Alge coauthored a work focused on the personal and situational factors of goal commitment and goal-setting. Additional work by Wheeler and Mahoney (1981) related to occupational work and expectancy theory, adding depth to expectancy theory.

Gaffney (2018) summarized expectancy theory strengths and weaknesses, noting that employees will be pleased and willing to participate in projects and initiatives that are well planned. Motivation to perform and to receive rewards is beneficial when the rewards are meaningful (Gaffney, 2018). Conversely, the theory is only effective with active manager participation to accurately assess skill and capability, known as expectancy (Gaffney, 2018). Managers must also know and understand what employees value for their rewards—valence—which is not always easy for managers to achieve.

Leader-Member Exchange Theory

LMX is a leadership theory focused on the dyadic relationship between the leader and the follower (Northouse, 2016; Schedin, 2018a). LMX emerged from the vertical dyad of linkage comprised of in-group and out-group roles (Northouse, 2016). Northouse (2016) found in-groups often better aligned and connected to the leader having greater organizational knowledge; in turn, the out-group was often less informed. The out-group was not necessarily dissatisfied but effectively getting the job done and happy to remain on the outside (Northouse, 2016). Important to in-group relationship development is that they develop in three phases: stranger, acquaintance, and mature partnership (Northouse, 2016; Schedin, 2018b).

Northouse (2016) outlined the strengths of LMX, noting that it would make sense to work with followers most interested in achievement (in-group). LMX is the only theory specifically focused on the relationship of the follower to the leader with effective dyads. LMX indicates that effective communication with the in-group is beneficial; however, the out-group needs to have just as much access. Criticism of LMX is its primary focus on the in-group and what seems inherently unfair related to knowledge of the out-group, or exclusion from the in-group, by the leader (Schedin, 2018b). Critics argue that researchers have not done enough to determine if other variables would affect outcomes (Northouse, 2016).

LMX theorists Cropanzano, Dasborough, and Weiss (2016) introduced contemporary viewpoints into their collaborative work on affective events and development. Walumbwa, Cropanzano, and Goldman (2011) focused on LMX managers who encourage reciprocity in the dyadic relationship. Cropanzano, Weiss, Hale, and Reb (2003) explored how the theory had both positive and negative effects for in-group and out-group members. A frequent author on LMX theory, Emmons (2007) has collaborated on several works related to positive psychology, gratitude, and well-being (Emmons & Crumpler, 2000; Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Emmons & Shelton, 2002).

Impending Enrollment Crisis in Higher Education

National demographic trends published by the Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education (WICHE) in 2016 indicate an enrollment crisis in higher education (Bransberger & Michelau, 2016). Leading to this crisis were the sheer volume of college and university options for students and the declining number of high school graduates (Bransberger & Michelau, 2016; Grawe, 2018; Hill, 2018; Horn, 2018). Grawe (2018) developed the Higher Education Demand Index that shows important regional and national demographic changes likely to impact the choice to go to college or not and where. Grawe (2018) referred to the deficit of high school graduates as a *birth dearth*, where the U.S. economic recession in the late 2000s decade did not simply delay children but prevented them.

In line with the WICHE data, Grawe (2016, 2018) noted that particular regions will experience more dramatic changes than others. Projections for the Northeast region are for a significant decline of high school graduates by 2032 (Bransberger & Michelau, 2016). In the WICHE data, Bransberger and Michelau (2016) reported that the Northeast:

> Produced around 639,000 graduates in 2012–13, or 18 percent of the national total. By 2029–30, the number of high school graduates in the Northeast is projected to decrease to around 567,000 graduates. This number will represent 72,000 fewer graduates by 2029–30 (a decline of 11 percentage points compared to 2012–13) and will lead to the

> Northeast contributing only 16 percent of the nation's high school graduates by that point. (p. 21)

Grawe (2018) was careful to note that although the projections of college-going students are based on data, who attends an institution is dependent on choice. Enrollment management and enrollment managers continue trying to influence the market among those eligible and available to attend (Hill, 2018; Hossler, 2004).

College Closures and Mergers[2]

The most significant impacts of falling enrollment are on budgets, resources, and personnel, which ultimately determine the success or failure of a college or university (Damiano, 2019; Mitchell, 2018; NACUBO, 2019). Joseph Chillo, president of the now-closed Newbury College in Newton, Massachusetts, identified things the college should have done to add revenue, such as develop online options and graduate programs (Wong, 2019). Chillo's clarity came too late, with the institution placed on probation by accreditors after experiencing financial issues before ultimately closing (Wong, 2019).

Increased competition for brick-and-mortar institutions comes from other campus-based institutions that have implemented online learning for students. The market for online learning is primarily adults who need to be close to home or work while they pursue their degree. Online students need only a computer to access and complete courses (Nguyen, 2019). Competitors are no longer just local colleges and universities but nationally based institutions, both not-for-profit and for-profit. One online nonprofit provider, Western Governors University, has roughly 20% annual growth, to achieve one million students (Blumenstyk, 2018). The small, regional school

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[2] Research for this study was conducted through the first week in March 2020, prior to the global pandemic; therefore, information about the impacts of this global crisis was not part of the literature review.

competes with the large, resource-rich institutions, and there is only so much investment possible in vying for students in the marketplace (Wong, 2019).

Not everyone agrees on the causes of small college closures (Eide, 2019). Commonly identified contributing factors include small endowments, challenged financial resources, regional competition, high discount rates, and low enrollments (Blumenstyk, 2013; Eide, 2019). According to the New England Commission of Higher Education (NECHE), there are more than 230 public and private colleges and universities in the six New England states, about half of them in Massachusetts alone (NECHE, 2019a). This amount of competition in a small geographic area, coupled with declining numbers of high school graduates, puts many of the smaller institutions at risk of closure or merger (Eide, 2019; Hill, 2018).

Given the challenge of supply and demand, it becomes easier to see the factors contributing to the demise of five colleges in Massachusetts and Vermont between 2017 and 2019 (Jaschik, 2019a). The need to adapt and change has forced other solutions, as well, such as mergers. The New Hampshire Institute of Art merged with New England College; Marlboro College has become part of Emerson College (Jaschik, 2019a). As enrollment challenges continue to plague small private colleges, institutions must adapt (Jaschik, 2019a; Pucciarelli & Kaplan, 2016).

Accreditors and Institutional Sustainability

Regional accreditors hold U.S. institutions accountable for meeting accreditation standards. The New England Commission of Higher Education (NECHE, 2019b) is the accrediting agency for the six states of Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Connecticut. The NECHE evaluates institutions, measuring them for effectiveness against nine standards that cover mission, planning, governance, academics, students, teaching, institutional resources, educational effectiveness, and public disclosures (NECHE, 2016). NECHE makes a determination for each standard that the institution "has assembled and organized those resources necessary to achieve its purposes" and "has the ability to continue to achieve its purposes" (NECHE, 2016, para. 3).

Religiously Affiliated Institutions

In 2012–2013, Astin and Lee's (1971) original research of 491 "invisible colleges" based on low enrollment and low selectivity was revisited (Tarrant, Bray, & Katsinas, 2017). In 2012–2013, 80 of the original 491 colleges had closed, 10 merged with other invisible colleges, 25 merged with another institution, and 22 experienced a change of status, leaving 354 of the original 491 remaining (Tarrant et al., 2017). Roman Catholic institutional religious affiliation declined between 1968 and 2012, with 22.9% of the 491 in 1968 Catholic compared to 19.5% in 2012 (n = 354) (Tarrant et al., 2017). Other religious affiliations such as American and Southern Baptist saw declines, as well (Tarrant et al., 2017). Of the 80 colleges that closed, 41.3% were Catholic institutions (Tarrant et al., 2017).

Catholic institutions are facing sustainability issues due to enrollment and fiscal challenges (O'Loughlin, 2018). Heather Gossart, senior consultant with the National Catholic Education Association, said, "A lot of our national data really indicate that some of these small Catholic colleges, as well as small private colleges throughout the country, are really struggling because of their finances" (Seltzer, 2017, para. 12). The fiscal challenges are affected by higher education trends such as tuition discounting and enrollment challenges (Seltzer, 2017).

Enrollment Management in Higher Education

It is possible to frame the higher education enrollment crisis through the lens of enrollment management as a structure for institutions achieving market share. Introducing the field of enrollment management was Jack Maguire (1976), a physics faculty member at Boston College in the 1970s before taking over the admissions department (Maguire, 1976). Maguire was leading admissions when an enrollment crisis hit the institution and applied his scientific knowledge and approach to attracting students. Today, the field entails a systematic approach to enrolling new students (Phair, 2014). Maguire focused on admissions, data, marketing, financial aid strategies, and retention, all of which remain core components of enrollment management (Hill, 2018).

The goal of an enrollment management division and its leader is just as the name implies: manage student enrollment (Black, 2004; Hossler & Kalsebeek, 2013). The strategies that go into finding and admitting a first-year class must align with the goals and objectives of the institution (Hossler & Kalsebeek, 2013). To meet enrollment goals in challenging demographic times, enrollment leaders must work with key campus stakeholders (Kooli, 2019). The objective is to determine the number of students needed to meet institutional budget demands and set that goal for admissions (Lapovsky & McKeown-Moak, 1999). It is significantly more complicated to compete for the declining number of students amid increased competition (Blumenstyk, 2013; Newman et al., 2004; Nguyen, 2019; Pucciarelli & Kaplan, 2016; Selingo, 2013).

Admissions Staffing

Personnel of varied titles accomplish a variety of responsibilities staff admissions offices at colleges and universities (Higher Ed Jobs, 2020). A review of open positions on Higher Ed

Jobs (2020) showed the range of titles and job responsibilities. That said, a common structure among institutions is hierarchical, beginning with the entry-level position of admissions counselor to chief enrollment officer (vice president for enrollment) and chief admissions officer or director of admissions, up to the most senior position of chief enrollment officer (Phair, 2014). Admissions counselors work directly with prospective students and applicants, with responsibilities that include recruitment-related travel and reviews of admission applications and transcripts (Higher Ed Jobs, 2020; NACAC, 2019; Phair, 2014). The director of admissions supervises the team of counselors and directs the efforts of the staff to meet institutional recruitment goals (Higher Ed Jobs, 2020; Phair, 2014; Study.com, 2019).

Less Selective Colleges and Recruitment

Enrollment success entails meeting an enrollment goal of the institution, usually established by budget demands (Lapovsky & McKeown-Moak, 1999). Ideally, the development of enrollment goals is through a structure of strategic enrollment management, as outlined by Hossler and Bontrager (2015), that includes committees and a variety in membership across an institution. In small private colleges, the process is likely following Lapovsky and McKeown-Moak (1999) and driven by finance. Less-selective institutions accept most applicants, who generally meet the admission criteria (My College Guide, 2019). A Pew Research Center analysis of U.S. Department of Education data showed that, in 2017, more than 50% of colleges and universities examined admitted at least two thirds of all applicants (DeSilver, 2019).

Change Strategies

Change will need to connect to the culture and climate of the organization (Curry, 1992; Kezar & Eckel, 2002). Institutional change impacts an institution’s culture and affects many people, offices, values, widely held beliefs, and opinions (Kezar & Eckel, 2002; Raluca & Alecsandru, 2012). Institutional change results in a changed organization.

Carey (2014) focused on two small private colleges in a study related to turning around dire fiscal crises. Both colleges' presidents had to make personnel decisions that would reinforce positive forward movement and mitigate damage, selecting which employees to release if they would be impediments to future success (Carey, 2014). Although layoffs or firings are not generally ways to make positive change, restructuring staffing to meet goals may be necessary (Carey, 2014).

According to McGee (2015), higher education as an industry is dealing with exceptional impactful forces affecting the future of higher education. McGee (2015) identified demographics and the economic shift as having the most severe implications for higher education in the current climate. Additionally, McGee (2015) expressed concern about the transitional moment of higher education as an industry, stating that colleges and universities must better understand their mission and the changing market. Carey (2014) referred to the notion of invisible colleges introduced by Astin and Lee in 1971. Essentially, Astin and Lee (1971) identified colleges with small enrollments and minimal endowments with average (or below average) students as the institutions most challenged for resources and longevity. The campus stakeholders at small institutions participate in the schools' success. Most important to achievement are leadership and a success model (Carey, 2014).

Strategic Planning and Change Management

Change in higher education is sometimes the result of a federal mandate from an accrediting body or planned and managed by the institution. Management and planning structures carefully crafted and orchestrated have guided the forward direction of an institution since the 1980s (Aponte, 2011). Toma (2010) discussed building organizational capacity necessary to create, establish, or sustain programs, plans, or initiatives aligned with the vision of the organization. Toma's (2010) framework includes eight categories: purpose (why), structure (configuration), governance (decisions), policies, processes, information, infrastructure, and culture. The notion of culture repeatedly appears in the literature and will be discussed later in this chapter.

Strategic Planning in Higher Education

In researching strategic planning across three industries—military, business, and higher education—Aponte (2011) found that strategic planning in higher education is much less sophisticated than in the military or business. The environment of higher education itself is open to ambiguity and misinterpretation, thus riddled with complexity and issues (Aponte, 2011; Hassanien, 2017). Legislatively, the government has mandated accountability across much of higher education (Hinton, 2012). The Higher Education Compliance Alliance (HECA) presents 39 topics and more than 280 associated statutes for which higher education is accountable (Compliance Matrix, 2019). Aponte proclaimed this accountability to be helpful in strategic planning, as it requires metrics, data, progress, and accountability based on good planning.

Closely related to this study, Delprino (2013) noted that followers and stakeholders might need leadership through the strategic planning process in a way that will outline the benefits. Communication, according to Delprino, is an essential factor among employees within higher education influencing their ability to accept any change. All stakeholders must see the connection of the change to the outcome (Delprino, 2013).

Hassanien (2017) identified challenges colleges and universities face to remain sustainable as different from those of a business. Meriting consideration are campus internal and external stakeholders as well as a changing landscape, indicating that timeliness is important (Hassanien, 2017).

Campus Stakeholders and Governance

The complexity of change in higher education is related to the varied constituents such institutions serve. Shared governance divides who has control and decision-making authority to various groups within an institution, creating a disconnect (Association of Governing Boards, 2018; Morrill, 2013). Because strategic planning and its associated decisions are a process requiring both development and follow-through, institutional health requires participant accountability (Hassanien, 2017). Historically speaking, change is likely focused on either the leader or the leadership style of the leader (Fullan, 2001; Kotter, 2010). The stakeholder is influential in change, driving its implementation (Bradfield & Clark, 2018). Although the focus on the stakeholders is important, Newman et al. (2004) argued that change is necessary, fueled by competition, and requires thoughtful policy and leadership.

Leadership and Leadership Styles in Higher Education

Leadership styles vary, including autocratic versus democratic, participative versus directive, and task-oriented versus relational, among others (Bass, 2008; Coleman, 2017; Malm, 2008; McGee, 2015). Higher education needs strategic thought leaders with insight and planning to focus on institutional goals (Malm, 2008; Marion & Gonzalez, 2014). Although one style might be the norm at an organization, leaders could have to alter communication and leadership styles to achieve desired outcomes (Bass, 2008).

Followers and Employees

Bass (2008) discussed at length the necessary relationship between the follower and the leader and the upward influence on the leader. Flynn (2019) suggested that followers share four characteristics with leaders: cognitive ability, emotional intelligence, motivation, and communication skills. Employees are likely to be independent, self-reliant workers, have a strong commitment to the organization, be able to master skills, and have courage, much like their leaders (Flynn, 2019). Brown (2013) considered being a good and effective leader is not enough; one must reflect the mindsets and decisions made. Having an increased awareness of others allows for the possibility of better decision-making and awareness (Brown, 2013).

Followers

Approaching leadership as a social exchange, a leader recognizes that followers have a worldview and perspective and lead from that perspective (Bass, 2008). Realizing the disconnect between the perspective of the followers and that of the leader serves as an important reminder in working with others to communicate effectively. A transactional leader could approach change using ingratiation, exchange, or a personal appeal to a subordinate (Bass, 2008). A transformational leader, on the other hand, is more likely to use rational persuasion to appeal to subordinates (Bass, 2008; Coleman, 2017). The resultant impact is that employees are more likely to be motivated to work toward the goal or objective (Coleman, 2017; Flynn, 2019).

Leaders who approach followers or employees with strong management of structured change also focus on the employees, not just the organization. Bradfield and Clark (2018) identified seven principles for sustaining commitment:

1. Bring together everyone who will be affected by the change.

2. Understand the culture.
3. Communicate information in a variety of ways.
4. Put oneself in the position of those whose jobs will change.
5. Pay attention to and create the opportunity for win-win situations.
6. Create bold goals with incremental steps.
7. Establish success criteria and always measure against the criteria.

Like Kotter (2010), Bradfield and Clark (2018) established that the followers would feel, and likely be, more successful in achieving attainable goals and reaching new ones.

Reinforcement and employee feedback can have either positive or negative results (Bass, 2008). One issue that could complicate the reward processes is that a leader might not have the ability to reward the follower in terms of pay or other benefits (Martin, 2018). Likewise, a follower who feels that feedback was not timely or specific is unlikely to perform better or differently in the future (Albrecht, 2010). Additionally, leaders often put off the necessary action of providing feedback, mainly when it is negative (Albrecht, 2010). Some followers receiving positive feedback for producing at a high level could become stressed, perceiving the need to continue to perform at that level to be successful (Bass, 2008).

Reframing Change for the Followers

As change requires followers to comply, it is beneficial for leadership to reframe change in a beneficial way whenever possible (Bolman & Deal, 2017). Not productive is to use language about loss or replacing an initiative (Bass, 2008; Buller, 2014). Language perceived less like an innovation killer and more encouraging using Buller's (2014) terminology of the "innovation midwife" are phrases such as "Before we make a final decision, let's review all our options," or

"I'd like to get your help on an idea I've been working on." Encouraging and not stifling free-thinking and creativity is the goal (English, 2008; Govindarajan & Trimble, 2013).

Resistance

Resistance to change is an essential component of change management, one perhaps heavily controlled by followers. Delprino (2013) position on resisting and accepting change occur on multiple levels within a group and organization. Additionally, nurturing followers to understand how the change will benefit them is vital early on in the process (Bryant, Coombs, & Pazio, 2014; Delprino, 2013), as change without explanation will not go well (Gearin, 2017). Moreover, Fullan (2001) identified the need for leaders to understand the stages followers will experience. The fear of the unknown related to change is ultimately what causes resistance (Bryant et al., 2014; Delprino, 2013; Gearin, 2017).

Culture

An organization's mission determines its culture, with rules for employees to participate in something bigger than themselves (Marion & Gonzalez, 2014). Marion and Gonzalez (2014) discussed William Tierney's inductive inquiry model containing elements of environment, mission, socialization, information, strategy, and leadership. Bass (2008) highlighted the leader's role in culture-building to develop and maintain the structure for the cultural components in the organization. In other words, leaders create the culture within the organization by utilizing whatever style they desire. Not only does the culture matter within an organization, but the overall climate is also important (Marion & Gonzalez, 2014).

Leadership, organizational structure, and change are all dependent on the organizational climate affected by the culture; the overall culture of the organization and the subcultures of departments are important as well (Bradfield & Clark, 2018). Marion and Gonzalez (2014) used an example of a speeding cluster of cars that comes along on a highway. Does the driver approaching the cluster join or move out of the way and let it go by? Drivers who join must learn, follow, and participate in the rules of engagement in the group of cars; if the cluster goes by, then an opportunity, whether good or bad, is lost (Marion & Gonzalez, 2014).

This shared experience and others like it are important for creating a sense of community, commonality, and purpose. When those who work on different teams with different types of leadership across an institution come together for celebration, it is a reminder that the common good is necessary (Bradfield & Clark, 2018). Even during the creation of an institution from inception, challenges remain for staff and administration to fit into what is expected. Goldsmith (1995) researched the creation of a new institution, California State University, Monterey Bay, in 1994. Early in the process, it was clear that the vision of creating a new academic model fostering innovation was fraught with issues as people struggled with what that meant (Goldsmith, 1995). As much as the organization's leaders wanted to be communal, flat, and not hierarchical, new faculty, staff, and administration struggled with creating the new campus's culture.

The culture at Catholic colleges connects to mission and values, and administrators who work at these institutions appreciate the support of the educational system that explores vocation and educating the whole person (Morey & Piderit, 2006). Administrators reported feeling that the Catholic culture at their institutions was weak, with little genuinely connected to Catholic tradition (Morey & Piderit, 2006). Like secular institutions, Catholic college leaders are also exploring new approaches to ensure survival, which can challenge mission and values (Wecker, 2018).

Communication

Boyer (2016) highlighted the need for effective, two-way, internal and external communication, which is critical to how a college moves ahead. Communication is not merely expressing information about new things but the ongoing discussion of what and why plans are evolving (Boyer, 2016). In addition to the importance of communication, Kotter (2010) identified the need to celebrate the wins along the way. Boyer (2016) named seven components of effective communication: (a) greater clarity and alignment for shared governance, (b) enriched community involvement, (c) share information and request feedback, (d) define shared governance, (e) create good web content, (f) maintain a social presence, and (g) develop an emergent-communication. The “Great Colleges to Work For” program incorporates these very topics and the communication necessary for employees to feel satisfied and contributory (Boyer, n.d.).

Employee Engagement

According to Coleman (2017), the first thing transformational leaders do is communicate with their followers (employees), often using all-hands meetings to convey important information. Communication is a common theme related to employee engagement (Curry, 1992; Flynn, 2019; Kotter, 2010). Employees who reflect the traits of the leader in terms of intelligence, motivation, skill, and emotional intelligence are likely to support the leader (Flynn, 2019). That said, to be engaged and invested in the college or university, employees are looking for elements of satisfaction, as well (Gallup, 2018b).

Gallup's Q12 assesses 12 specific things believed to be the best measure of engagement (Gallup, 2018b). The questions have a component of personal connectivity to the work and how the individuals feel about their connection, satisfaction, and subsequent engagement with the institution (Gallup, 2018b). The use of Gallup's (2018b) Q12 provides insight into an institution's climate regarding employee engagement, thus allowing institutions to address weaknesses that could otherwise hinder change management efforts (Cartwright & Holmes, 2006). Professional development is an investment organizations can make in their employees. Providing opportunities for growth and a career path will help employees feel connected to the work they are doing (Martin, 2018).

Challenges require more connection and conversation. Both servant and transformational leaders are interested in the individual as well as the organization (Bass, 2008; Farnsworth, 2007). Farnsworth (2007) highlighted components of servant leadership connected to the areas in which most employees want support:

> [A] fundamental principle of syncretic leadership is to help each person served by the organization realize personal goals of growth and service while at the same time furthering the mission of the institution in an atmosphere of power-with, the leaders first responsibility must be to learn what those goals are. (p. 51)

Connection and Trust

Gallup's (2018b) work with higher education institutions to understand employee engagement helps leaders to identify meaning, connection, and trust in the workplace. Questions on the Gallup Q12 tool center on the individual's need to be heard and validated (Gallup, 2018b). One area of exploration in the Gallup Q12 is whether employees have a "best friend" at work and feel that a coworker or supervisor cares about them. Fullan (2001) discussed relationships and how they relate to achieving organizational goals. Fullan noted that leaders who exhibit strong emotional intelligence are the ones most likely to connect and build strong, effective relationships.

Credit and Recognition

Bass (2008) proposed that recognition of followers' or employees' efforts can be transformational, supporting their growth. Coleman (2017) highlighted that credit and recognition could accompany, for example, campus-specific celebratory events. Salary increases are another means of positive reinforcement for doing more, taking on more, and excelling at work (Coleman, 2017). However, according to Bass, praising some followers for achieving at a high level could create stress, along with the fear of having to perform at such a high level consistently.

Conclusion

As colleges and universities strive to distinguish themselves from other institutions to compete for new students, they need to innovate and create new initiatives (Hanover Research, 2014). Leadership advances new concepts, expecting that others within an organization will embrace and implement the initiative (Kotter, 2010). Often, these initiatives are short-lived or fail because employees did not participate in the change, believing it was the responsibility of other people (Malm, 2008).

Change initiatives by university leadership impact faculty, staff, and administration's opinions about their relationship to change at their institution (Bass, 2008; Coleman, 2017; Delprino, 2013). Understanding employees' levels of commitment to change, including their understanding of why it is necessary, could streamline institutionalizing innovation from concept to execution. Employees' contributions to enacting or implementing change as well as gauging their connection to change with types of leaders and leadership styles could also be beneficial to institutions and institutional leadership.

Missing from the literature is an assessment of the impact of leadership decisions to address enrollment challenges on admissions directors in a region with declining numbers of high school graduates. This study stemmed from prior research related to employee engagement in higher education (Biggs et al., 2014; Boyer, n.d.). The specific connection between institutional leadership and the need to manage change and followers within the institution were also reviewed (Biggs et al., 2014; Boyer, 2016; Bradfield & Clark, 2018; Delprino, 2103; Gearin, 2107).

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this IPA study was to learn about and describe the understanding of admissions directors responsible for the recruitment and enrollment of new students at small, less-selective, private, Catholic colleges and universities in New England. The selected institutions faced anticipated enrollment challenges in light of declining numbers of high school graduates that could impact institutional survival (Grawe, 2018). These admissions professionals also experienced regional landscape changes, as other colleges in the areas have closed unexpectedly (Damiano, 2019). The researcher conducted a qualitative constructivist study using IPA through purposive sampling and semi-structured interviews of admissions professionals at eight sites.

Research Question

The essential questions in this research study were:

1. What is admissions directors' level of understanding about the impending 2020–2030 enrollment crisis at small, less-selective, private Catholic colleges and universities in New England?
2. What is the role of admissions directors at small, less-selective, private Catholic colleges and universities in New England in the institutional response to the enrollment crisis?

Methodology and Design

The purpose of this IPA study was to describe the understanding of admissions directors responsible for recruitment for first-time, full-time students at small, private Catholic colleges and universities in New England. Participants' institutions were experiencing financial and enrollment challenges that could impact their survival as high school graduation rates continue to decline in the Northeast United States. In this study, the researcher sought to understand, through interviews with eight individuals, their perspective and insights, with subsequent analysis and interpretation to develop deeper understanding and meaning of their perceptions of, and experiences with, change.

The use of IPA was beneficial as it centers on understanding the lived experiences of people (Creswell, 2014). IPA, as a qualitative research approach, is a "social constructivists worldview," and the premise is that constructionists "believe that individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work" (Creswell, 2014, p. 8). Further, IPA entails making and developing meaning from experiences (Creswell, 2014), which allowed for a deep understanding of the central research questions.

Site Information and Population

The selection of sites and participants met the researcher's intention to explore multiple sites and to understand the perspectives of individuals in those locations. The researcher accessed a roster of admissions directors responsible for recruiting and enrolling first-time, first-year students. The purpose of the study was to better understand these directors' perspectives related to the current climate of campus change associated with the impending enrollment crisis.

Site Information

The sites selected for the study were small, less-selective, Catholic colleges and universities in New England. All of the institutions were private, 4-year, residential campuses. Reference to each institution in this study is by pseudonym. Each institutions' undergraduate enrollment was 3,600 or less, with an acceptance rate of 60% or more (IPEDS, 2019). Excluded from the study were theological campuses, or seminaries, with fewer than 100 students (College Navigator, 2019).

Population

The participants for this study were eight admissions directors responsible for the recruitment and enrollment of new students. Participants oversaw departments, creating annual recruitment plans for their institutions. The participants also had responsibility for recruiting the incoming class of undergraduate first-time, full-time students. Participants received a written invitation via e-mail (see Appendix A). Interviews took place at their convenience by telephone.

Sampling Method

The nonprobability method of purposive sampling was appropriate to select a deliberate population at specific sites to answer the central research questions (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016). Further refinement to homogeneous sampling was the result of needing participants likely to have similar backgrounds and similar experiences (Etikan et al., 2016). This sampling method was the best fit for the study, as the participants were the most available to the researcher and specific to the sites.

Participant selection entailed accessing institutions that fit the criteria determined through IPEDS data (NCES, n.d.). Job titles reflected those who qualified as admissions directors, as defined previously, through directory searches on the institutions' websites. Individuals received invitations to participate via e-mail (see Appendix A). The invitation specified details about the study, the criterion for participation, timeframe, and commitment as well as the confidentiality of their identity. Participants in the study learned of their participant rights through the informed consent form, which they had to sign (see Appendix B).

Data Collection

Researchers design the means of instrumentation and data collection based on the study approach as determined by the central research question (Creswell, 2013). As the research questions were a means to understand a phenomenon, the best data analysis approach was IPA. Participant identities are de-identified to maintain confidentiality. This researcher also ensured participants' confidentiality regarding any potentially sensitive information.

Interview Questions

The researcher-developed interview protocol (see Appendix C) aligned with the theoretical frameworks of expectancy theory and LMX (Northouse, 2016; Vroom, 1964). The researcher asked questions directly related to leadership and the participants' experience with change. Additionally, the interview questions provided an opportunity for the interviewee to reflect and share information about the challenging higher education environment in New England regarding dimensions of rapid change and pressure for institutional sustainability. The questions connected directly to the information in the literature review.[3]

[3] Research for this study was conducted by the first week in March 2020, prior to the global pandemic; therefore, information about the impacts of this global crisis was not part of the interview protocol.

Data Collection

Data collection occurred over 3 weeks, with participant solicitation over the preceding 4 weeks. Audio-recorded, semi-structured interviews took place with nine participants identified as admissions directors with responsibility for recruitment goals. Interviews are a primary method of data collection in IPA, as understanding the personal, perceived, lived experienced of participants is the goal (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008; Creswell, 2013, 2014). Identifying information remained confidential with the use of pseudonyms and unique identifiers. Audio recording occurred via the recording feature on the researcher's iPhone (voice memos), with handwritten notes taken at the same time. The researcher kept the handwritten notes stored in locked files and the audio recordings are password protected.

An open-ended interview protocol provided structure for interviewing participants, allowing the researcher to uncover feelings and opinions that may have gone unmentioned if using another means of data collection (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). The interview questions were connected to the research questions and the theoretical framework of the study related to expectancy theory and LMX.

The researcher asked open-ended questions in a semi-structured format (see Appendix B), allotting 45 to 90 minutes for each interview. None ran longer than one hour. Participant responses elicited information sufficient to answer the research questions; however, a researcher does not directly ask the research questions (Smith et al., 2009). Participants provided descriptive data at the outset of the interview for demographic backgrounds, followed by answers to the interview questions (see Appendix B).

Participants were able to select between in-person, Skype, Zoom, or telephone interviews. All interviews took place by telephone, recorded using the researcher's iPhone, saved, transcribed, and backed up for the duration of the study, with deletion upon study completion. Participants had an opportunity to review a transcript of the interview to ensure accuracy.

Data Analysis

Transcription service Rev.com transcribed all digital recordings, with the researcher subsequently reviewing transcripts for accuracy before coding for concepts and themes. The researcher used Quirkos software as a coding tool upon receipt of the transcripts. The data analysis process entailed reading and rereading transcripts while noting and identifying themes. Thematic and pattern development across interviews occur during this process (Smith et al., 2009).

The researcher reviewed each interview in context and analyzed the content holistically before extending the interpretation across all interviews. The researcher decided to exclude one interview due to the participant's more senior role and responsibilities, with their responses out of alignment with the other participants. As someone who also works in higher education, the researcher needed to remain unbiased during the data analysis process. Epoché and the documentation thereof was a means to keep biases in check (Tufford & Newman, 2010).

Focusing on epoché, phenomenological reduction and imaginative variation were simultaneous while analyzing the interviews (Butler, 2016). In practicing epoché, a researcher intentionally sets aside personal perspectives and preconceptions, achieving an unbiased approach to reviewing and analyzing the interviews. Phenomenological reduction occurs in narrowing the transcripts into themes and subthemes central to the research questions (Butler, 2016). Finally, the application of imaginative variation in reviewing the themes enables the determination of structural themes based on previous analysis (Butler, 2016; Moustakas, 1994).

Limitations of the Research Design

Using a homogenous, purposive sampling method could have been a possible limitation of the study. A limitation of the sampling method was that it did not include random participants, perhaps allowing for researcher bias in selecting participants (Etikan et al., 2016). The sample size could also be a limitation, as a small size may not have provided enough information. If the participants had worked at other institutions of higher learning, the interviews might have provided more contextual benefits.

Additionally, the researcher worked in the field of higher education in a strategic leadership role, which could have influenced perceptions about the participants' experiences. There was a chance that the participants knew the researcher. Biases exist, and the researcher attempted to address them by epoché (or bracketing) consistently. Epoché allows a researcher to suspend any biases or judgment to objectively interpret the phenomena studied (Butler, 2016).

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness, or the rigor of this study, is connected to four specific attributes of the research: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Connelly, 2016; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). All four are commonly accepted in qualitative research (Connelly, 2016). Trustworthiness as a term could also be considered as establishing a connection of the study's findings as being authentic (Carlson, 2010).

Credibility

Techniques and methods are available for authentication, and one used in this study was member checking. Corroboration of facts and information with the participants is an effective method of verifying the researcher's interpretations. This corroboration, known as member checking, validates the overall accuracy of the findings by obtaining participants' insight into preliminary thematic analysis (Creswell, 2013; Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). Copies of their individual transcript were provided to each participant for their review to ensure accuracy.

Transferability

The transferability of research findings to another site is possible if readers find the rich descriptions applicable to their populations and purposes (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). Combining credibility, and thick descriptions allow the reader to determine whether the study findings are generalizable to their site (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008; Creswell, 2013).

Should other researchers replicate the study utilizing the same interview questions at a different type of institution, they may find some similarities concerning the way admissions directors experience the ongoing climate of change. The most significant institution variables could be the focus and size, as well as the type of leadership exercised by the president of the institution.

Dependability

A researcher establishes dependability with details related to the means of data collection and management (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). All participants opted for interviews via telephone, which the researcher recorded using the voice memos iPhone application, saved, had transcribed, and backed up for the duration of the study should the original content have been needed. Rev.com transcribed the recordings, which the researcher reviewed for accuracy before coding. The researcher used Quirkos software as a tool for coding transcripts for concepts and themes.

The researcher ensured the individual nature of each interview and analyzed the content on its own before assessing the interpretation across all interviews. There was a necessity for the researcher to remain unbiased during the data analysis process. Bracketing was a means to keep biases in check (Tufford & Newman, 2010).

Confirmability

Confirmability is the concept that findings are a result of the research and not determined by researcher bias (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). Means of enhancing confirmability included keeping an audit trail with detailed notes, journaling, and transcripts (Miles et al., 2014).

Ethical Issues in the Study

Ethical issues may arise during different phases of the research, thus necessitating a researcher to remain aware of the possibility throughout the process (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). Potential issues could have arisen because of working with human subjects; obtaining informed consent is thus a critical component of social science research (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). Participants received and signed a consent form that detailed the purpose of the study and their role (see Appendix C). The researcher also informed participants of her position working in higher education and the influence that may or may not have had for those participating in the study.

Conclusion and Summary

Change is inevitable, and in times of enrollment challenges, higher education institutions must consider change (Christensen & Eyring, 2011; Grawe, 2018; Selingo, 2013; Zemsky et al., 2020). Understanding the individual experiences of those in the study was a way to answer the central research questions. The study was an IPA of eight admissions professionals responsible for new student recruitment and enrollment. The sampling method was purposive to select those individuals who were the best fit to answer the research questions. The sites for the study were small, less-selective, Catholic colleges and universities in New England.

The researcher adhered to quality data collection and analysis processes. Confidentiality and privacy came from assigning pseudonyms to individual participants and sites, with data collected, password-protected, and safeguarded for privacy. The researcher also practiced bracketing, or epoché, to present personal biases or judgment from entering into the study. Ensuring the trustworthiness of the study entailed diligent attention to credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Connelly, 2016).

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to understand the perspectives and roles of chief admissions officers at small, less-selective, Catholic colleges and universities facing the impending enrollment crisis in New England. The researcher conducted a thorough analysis of the data collected through interviews to understand perspectives and answer the following research questions

1. What is admissions directors' level of understanding about the impending 2020–2030 enrollment crisis at small, less-selective, private Catholic colleges and universities in New England?
2. What is the role of admissions directors at small, less-selective, private Catholic colleges and universities in New England in the institutional response to the enrollment crisis?

Interviews with the participants revealed three themes supported by subthemes. Theme 1, level of understanding of impending enrollment crisis, supports Research Question 1 to discern admissions directors' experiences and knowledge. Theme 2, enrollment crisis effect on institutional sustainability, supports both Research Questions 1 and 2 and stemmed from admissions directors' comments on their institution's decisions to address the changing higher education landscape. Theme 3, role of admissions directors and sphere of influence, ties to Research Question 2 and the institutions' reliance on the role.

Institutions

The determination of institutions for the multisite research study came from available fall 2018 IPEDS (2019) data. Eligible New England Catholic colleges and universities were private, 4-year residential campuses with undergraduate full-time enrollment of 3,600 or less and an acceptance rate of at least 60% (IPEDS, 2019). The determination of site admissions selectivity (acceptance percentage) occurred mathematically from the number of applications and number accepted rather than any other source labeling institutions as selective (IPEDS, 2019). Sixteen institutions met the criteria; eight were part of the study based on invitation responses (see Table 1).

Table 1

Institutions Represented in the Study

Institution pseudonym	Total full-time undergraduate enrollment	First-time, full-time headcount	Application total	Acceptance Total	Acceptance rate	Yield percent
Institution A	946	267	2,125	1,543	73%	17.3%
Institution B	765	218	1,414	1,023	73%	21.3%
Institution C	1,935	596	5,770	4,443	77%	13.4%
Institution D	3,572	1,122	8,668	7,174	83%	15.6%
Institution E	937	318	3,177	2,339	79%	13.6%
Institution F	1,128	336	1,388	806	64%	41.7%
Institution G	1,149	229	2,207	1,711	78%	13.4%
Institution H	2,167	553	4,178	3,387	81%	16.3%

Participants

Participant selection was from 16 possible colleges or universities meeting the criteria of the study, as indicated in IPEDS (2019) data. Nineteen chief enrollment officers from 16 institutions received invitations to participate (see Appendix A), nine of whom responded. Each participant took part in a semi-structured interview that lasted between 30 and 55 minutes, with one interview later excluded from data analysis due to the individual's more senior level of responsibility. Table 2 shows participant information using pseudonyms and derived from the interview protocol (see Appendix C).

Table 2

Description of Participants

Participant pseudonym	Gender/ identity	Years in the profession	Years at current institution	Number of institutions at which they worked in admissions	Highest degree earned or in progress (IP)
Abigail	Female	20	7	3	Master's (IP)
Sarah	Female	10	3.5	2	Doctorate (IP)
Nick	Male	12	2.5	3	Master's
Kate	Female	6	6	1	Master's
Greg	Male	4	4	1	Bachelor's
Jack	Male	10	2.5	2	Master's
Lauren	Female	13	5	3	Bachelor's
Adam	Male	15	3.5	4	Master's

Abigail

Abigail was in her 20th year of working in higher education, with all her experience in recruitment and admissions. Abigail had prior tenure in the for-profit higher education sector and was now working at a Catholic institution for the first time.

Sarah

Sarah had 10 years' experience in higher education, three and half of them at her current institution. Prior to this, she worked at another New England Catholic college. Sarah was a tour guide in college later recruited to work at her alma mater after being out of college for a year.

Nick

Nick had 12 years of experience in admissions. He has worked at three colleges, having been at his current institution for three and a half years. Nick was a tour guide in college but did not start work in admissions until after graduation.

Kate

Kate had worked at her alma mater for six years now, which is also how long she has been working in admissions and in higher education. She started as a graduate student fellow in the admissions office before becoming an admissions counselor, advancing to a senior admission counselor, an assistant director, and then an associate director.

Greg

Greg had four years' experience in admissions at one institution. He began as a coach while working in sales before joining the admissions department.

Jack

Jack had worked at his current institution for two and a half years, with 10 years' admissions experience across two institutions. Jack began working in admissions as an intern in college with the job responsibilities of an admission counselor.

Lauren

Lauren had five years of experience at her current institution, having worked at three colleges for 13 nonconsecutive years. Lauren began on the operations side at her first institution.

Adam

Adam had professional experience at four colleges for over 15 years. He had been at his current institution for three and a half years. Adam started his admissions career working as a student tour guide for all four years in college.

Analysis Method

Smith et al. (2009) recommended an IPA multistep process of reading and rereading interviews; making initial notes including three processes of descriptive comments, linguistic comments, and conceptual comments; and deconstruction followed by theme development. An initial reading while listening to the audio recording was a means to confirm each transcript before manual analysis and coding. Next, the researcher uploaded each transcript (without coding) to the secure, password-protected cloud service Quirkos in a single project file for further determination of codes. Qualitative analysis entailed coding each transcript within a single project, with the codes subsequently created to develop themes and subthemes.

Themes and Subthemes

Themes and subthemes emerged from patterns identified across all interviews. Creswell (2015) described the deduction of themes from the broad array of codes developed in the analysis phase of coding. Specifically, Creswell identified ordinary themes as an overall category. Determining ordinary themes was appropriate for the field of admissions, as the terms related to higher education would likely be familiar and expected. Based on this process and the codes developed from analyzing interview data, three themes emerged: (a) level of understanding of impending enrollment crisis, (b) enrollment crisis effect on institutional sustainability, and (c) role of admissions directors and sphere of influence. Each theme contains subthemes, as listed in Table 3.

Table 3

Themes and Subthemes

	Number of participants commenting	Research question alignment
Theme 1: Level of understanding of impending enrollment crisis	8	1
Declining high school students and mobility	7	
Increased competition	6	
NACAC Code of Ethics changes	4	
Goal achievement	8	
Cost and value	4	
Theme 2: Enrollment crisis effect on institutional sustainability	8	1 & 2
College closures	5	
New initiatives	8	
Budgets, revenue, and resources	4	
Mission	3	
Theme 3: Role of admissions directors and sphere of influence	8	2
Supervisors and admissions directors	8	
Stakeholders (faculty)	8	
Presidents	8	

Theme 1: Level of Understanding of Impending Enrollment Crisis

Participants expressed similar, often identical concerns regarding the impending enrollment crisis, yet with an uneven depth of knowledge about it. The eight directors of admission discussed recruiting within New England and the increased competition for the same fewer numbers of students as the high school graduate population declines in the region. No one used the terms “enrollment crisis” or “crisis” in responding to questions about challenges or concerns in recruiting students. They all discussed competitor institutions that were not limited to other similar Catholic colleges, but included public institutions and other private, non-religiously affiliated colleges. There was no mention of the Catholic affiliation beyond one admissions director discussing a tactic of recruiting from Catholic high schools. Additionally, none of the admissions directors categorized their college as a less-selective private institution.

Subtheme 1: Declining high school students and mobility. All participants expressed concern over the declining number of high school graduates between 2020 and 2030, but to different degrees. Some spoke about it on the surface and others with specificity; no one referenced the birth dearth. In terms of demographics, Adam said, “We [will] see a slight peak in 2023 or 2024, then it’s another sharp nosedive.” The mobility of students (willingness to go to college out-of-state), as well as fewer students in a region, were concerns. Not only are there fewer students, but New England students are more willing to leave the region, according to Nick.

In light of the forthcoming cliff, Jack said, “We all need to be prepared for it. But I think that it’s important for every college to continue to strive for optimism.” This idea of optimism came from all eight participants with thoughts on planning and strategy, like Sarah, who said,

> We are trying to think strategically, but also not dive into markets that are fairly oversaturated by everybody else in New England. Everybody goes to California, Florida, and Texas, so where can we go that’s a little bit different, and that’s going to set us apart.

Participants were aware of shifting demographics and the impending enrollment crisis for New England colleges, yet did not discuss it beyond declining high school student numbers or a cliff.

Subtheme 2: Increased competition. Competition is something all eight participants discussed related to attracting students. Abigail commented about competition for an in-demand, anchor program at her institution, saying, “Certainly, nursing is our top program here, and there are just fewer and fewer nursing students to go around.” In addition to the declining available number of students, this assertion stands up, as three of the eight other admissions directors report their institutions having added baccalaureate nursing to the portfolio of programs in the last 3 years. Lauren, whose institution has long had a nursing program, lamented the addition of programs “popping up all the time from schools you already compete with.”

Repeated by each interviewee was the concern to stand out among the competition and to ensure that students received the recruitment message. Kate stated, “I think that especially, given the heightened level of competitive nature, the competitive nature of our general area, but also higher education. I think that there is a lot of noise that is out there.”

Worry and some frustration were common among the admissions directors. Abigail and Jack reported that their institutions have struggled with recognizability in their cities. As much fear as there was, all participants but one also highlighted their location as a strength or benefit in one way or another.

Subtheme 3: NACAC Code of Ethics changes. Four of the eight participants expressed concern about the recent changes to their national professional organization’s code of ethics guiding recruitment. Jack asserted, “I think we’re all entering into uncharted waters where we don’t know how aggressive some schools will be versus other schools . . . [and] how will they have to react when someone is actually poaching students.” Similarly, Abigail shared concern that institutions will recruit beyond May 1; although Lauren has not seen anything yet, the potential for poaching adds “a level of concern.” Sarah stated,

> In light of all the changes to NACAC and a lack of guidelines, it's hard to compete with institutions that weren't necessarily rule followers to begin with, and then in light of the changes are now really not following the rules. Well, there are no rules to follow.

Concerning to the admissions directors is that the rules they followed are now gone, which creates another challenge for recruiting and enrolling their classes beyond that of declining numbers of high school students.

Subtheme 4: Goal achievement. All eight participants discussed goals in one manner or another. Adam reflected on not having a national reputation as being detrimental as he prepares for the impending enrollment crisis in terms of both competition and achieving enrollment goals. Four admissions directors discussed goals in terms of success and failure. Given the perspectives on recruiting and enrollment challenges, Abigail framed the personal nature of achieving institutional goals, saying, "I think, for me, it would always feel personal because it feels like a failure, but you also can't win all the time." Reported Jack, "It's a challenging time to try to put a target number where you feel like you're going to be able to nail down exactly how many students you're handling." Sentiments shared by all the admissions directors were that the unknown always affects goal attainment and yield.

Subtheme 5: Cost and value. Another recruiting challenge for admissions directors is cost and value or return on investment. Sarah stated, "One of our biggest competitors is 5 minutes down the road, and they've been price matching for years, and it's only gotten worse." Sarah also lamented discounted tuition rates, citing that their nearest competitor discounted 25% more than her institution. Adam said, "The pressure on the discount rate is so significant right now. How do we balance both the revenue that we're bringing into the college, but also making sure that we’re remaining competitive?” Lauren supported this notion, stating that her top recruits who are receiving the highest scholarships at her institution are also receiving it at the other colleges.

Theme 2: Enrollment Crisis Effect on Institutional Sustainability

Although all admissions directors knew of college closures in the New England region, none perceived their institution at immediate risk of closing, even in light of the impending enrollment crisis affecting small, private, Catholic institutions in New England. When asked whether there were concerns on campus about closing, three respondents framed their answer as affirmative, in that concern is a given due to the region and recent closures; however, they did not believe their institutions were currently in jeopardy.

Still, all admissions directors expressed optimism that their campus leadership was doing everything it could for long-term sustainability. One admissions director discussed the strength of the institution’s endowment and three mentioned consistent enrollment, despite changing demographics as factors supporting sustainability. That said, all participants commented on competing for the same students with a significant overlap in programs. Location and student fit were two of the top determinants students would use in their selection process to differentiate institutions.

The impressions about long-term viability emerged in terms of campus leaders and how they communicated information and managed resources. Nick shared, “We realize there’s always challenges in front of us, but we feel confident in the way that we’re moving forward with that and that we’re not in any grave concern.” All eight admissions directors indicated that their work, or role at the institution, was to ensure stability by achieving enrollment goals.

Subtheme 1: College closures. The eight admissions directors all referred to colleges in New England, either in general or by name, with specifics being Newbury College and Mount Ida College, both in Massachusetts. Still, the admissions directors were all upbeat and positive regarding their own institutions. Asked if there was any concern about closing his campus, Adam said, "I can answer that as someone that worked at an institution that was having those conversations [to close]. To me, it's very clearly different here."

Subtheme 2: New initiatives. All eight admissions directors spoke about new initiatives deployed at their institutions to attract students and create a desirable destination to ensure viability. Seven of the eight admissions directors said their college had added new programs, and five admissions directors stated their institutions had added or updated facilities such as residence halls, dining halls, academic spaces, recreation centers, and athletic facilities. One admissions director reported new sports added at his college and two identified new customer resource management technology for their departments.

Nick shared the ability to target different populations of students with new programs. He said, "We're not simply going after the same target audience, but we've been able to broaden that audience and bring in students who might not have considered the college 5 years ago." At Greg's institution, the leadership has added four athletic programs in 2 years and "four or five majors in just the last year alone."

Subtheme 3: Budgets, revenue, and resources. The admissions directors spoke on the topics of budgets, revenue, and resources interchangeably with goals and recruitment. Participants' discussions of the new endeavors clearly indicated that all efforts were attempts to attract new students, which was their primary responsibility. Secondarily, but no less important, was the need for retaining students.

All institutions had invested in new initiatives, be they academic, student support, athletics or facility improvements, or new construction. Resources at five of the eight institutions have gone to new facilities. Sarah reported on the president's student-focused construction, saying, "We have a brand-new student center and dining hall that opened in January. Our recreation center expansion will open this time next year."

Abigail shared her challenges in recruiting, saying, "I also think budget is always an issue. Being a small private Catholic [school], we only have so many dollars to do all of those things." Nick discussed the need for "making sure that we have enough students to meet our budgetary needs for the next year of the college's operations, as well as ensuring that those students are academically eligible and capable of having success at the college." Greg focused on human resources, stressing the importance of having positions filled and enough staff to do the work and to meet goals.

Subtheme 4: Mission. Accordingly, mission was inherent to the institutions and how each of the admissions directors viewed the work of the admissions office, not framed as a recruitment benefit or in association with their Catholic institutional identity. As the staff recruit and admit students, they discuss which students are the best fit for the college or university, not so much to recruit but to retain. Adam stated, "Mission is a big component to it. We want to make sure that we're bringing in students that are going to fit into that community and be part of that." Abigail asserted that "students, especially undergraduates now, they want to change the world. They want things to happen. And that goes so well with our mission." Sarah echoed the other admissions directors in supporting her school, stating, "I would say we are a values-based institution, and we just aren't going to do anything that doesn't feel like it aligns with who we are as an institution."

Theme 3: Role of Admissions Directors and Sphere of Influence

The findings showed that the role of admissions directors and their sphere of influence on their campuses in the institutional response to the enrollment crisis is limited, but heavily depended upon. All eight admissions directors were committed to the work they do and connected to the institution where they work. Participants repeatedly commented about the support from their supervisors, who, in most cases, is the vice president for enrollment and the president. The sphere of influence for all eight admissions directors was a team of direct reports and the vice president of enrollment.

The most senior leader at the colleges is the president, and in all but one circumstance, the admissions directors were only one position removed. Although most of the admissions directors do not have direct contact with the president on more than an incidental basis, they report to someone who does have direct contact with the president. All participants expressed that, although their role is challenging, they feel supported by both their supervisor and the president. In turn, this support creates an environment in which they can face challenges related to the impending enrollment crisis because they feel connected to the institution, which reinforces their commitment to achieving recruitment goals.

Subtheme 1: Supervisors and admissions directors. The relationship between the directors of admission and their supervisors is valued and essential, as expressed by the eight admissions directors and impacts their perceived, or real, role on campus. About her relationship with her supervisor, Sarah replied, "I would say [she] and I are so close that I can share anything with her . . . by far, the most influential person on my career over the last 3 and a half years." Greg echoed the concept of being understood when he said:

> I don't think that there's too much that he doesn't know, because we work so closely with one another that we are very open throughout the process and the challenges that we are facing. We do understand one another in terms of the opportunities that's out there.

Some admissions directors described having a good relationship with their supervisor, which changes when the vice president does not have an admissions background. The disconnect creates a fundamental challenge to the role of admissions director specific to a lack of experience regarding what travel season is genuinely like for admissions personnel each fall. Lauren described having a supervisor with no previous admission experience:

> I think it's just what it's like to be on the road for 8 weeks straight and just having that understanding and empathy for the work that other people are doing, and she does. But I just think there's a disconnect there, I think in terms of the expectation versus the number of people on staff, that kind of thing.

Adam's supervisor was also supportive, but the challenge was that "he came up through financial aid. We tend to, I don't want to say battle, but we tend to go back and forth because we just have a different viewpoint of how things should run."

Subtheme 2: Stakeholders. Everyone on campus is a stakeholder at the eight colleges represented in this study, with faculty the more common ones discussed. The admissions directors shared dual thoughts about the faculty as being helpful, supportive, and well-meaning yet unknowing or out of touch with contemporary recruitment practices designed for the Gen Z student. An expressed concern for seven of the admissions directors was the outcome of fewer students. Adam expressed the impact on campuses, saying that faculty "still blame us. There is still going to be blame pushed, but I think there's a large segment of the population that understands what we're up against in terms of the competition, the numbers, all of that."

Sarah expressed the frustration that faculty cause admissions directors, saying, "I think there's definitely a disconnect when it comes to faculty. Just because their program doesn't have students in it doesn't mean it's not because we didn't market it and we didn't recruit for it." Additionally, Sarah said, "I wish they knew that we are aware of everything that's going on . . . that we're on top of it all and we're recruiting in all the places that they think we should be recruiting." Jack shared some of this frustration: "Sometimes they think that we kind of sit here with our feet up while we're waiting for students to come to us and [we're] not being proactive." Overall, all admissions directors expressed positives and negatives about campus stakeholders.

Subtheme 3: Presidents. All eight participants shared favorable impressions of their institutions' presidents when discussing their experiences and observations. The admissions directors expressed positive opinions of the knowledge their presidents have about the current climate in higher education that affects enrollment at small, private colleges. Moreover, they all shared in the certainty that their presidents were providing positive leadership and giving them support. Sarah stated,

> I think I'm very fortunate that both my vice president and the president are very in the know and they're also on my side. And so it never feels like a battle, and it always feels like you just have support of everyone above you.

Expression of this support by leadership indicates that the director of admissions has an impactful role on campus. Molly added, " [The president] is very open, and she brings up [sustainability] at extended cabinet. She hosts a community forum for the entire faculty and staff three times a year. She'll talk about internal challenges [and] external challenges." Nick shared, "The president and senior leadership have a pretty solid understanding of the challenges that face higher ed and, in particular, those facing schools in the Northeast and those facing small, liberal arts colleges."

Summary

The purpose of this study was to learn from directors of admission at New England, less-selective, Catholic colleges and universities regarding their understanding of the impending enrollment crisis and their role on campus in response to it. During semi-structured interviews, participants presented a varied depth of experiences in admissions and exposure to the data regarding the birth dearth and the future impact on enrollment at individual institutions. Although everyone could speak to the topic of declining high school graduates in the Northeast, there was disparity in the depth of knowledge about the topic and the reasons for the decline. Some participants had read about the decline and said as much; others discussed it at a high level with less detail. The role of the admissions directors on campus in response to the impending enrollment crisis centered around changing to address the needs of Gen Z at a fast pace, faster than the rest of the institution. The admissions directors are adapting as quickly as systems, structures, and resources allow.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this qualitative IPA study was to research admissions directors' understanding of the birth dearth and declining high school graduate numbers through 2030, and the implications for new student recruitment at small, private, less-selective, Catholic colleges and universities in New England. Further, the study entailed exploration of the admissions directors' role in the response of institutional leadership to address recruitment challenges for institutional survival. Chapter 5 contains a discussion of findings related to the literature on demographics, impending enrollment crisis, invisible colleges, enrollment management, and institutional survival and sustainability. Also included in this chapter is a discussion of the connection to conceptual theory and motivational theories. The chapter concludes with suggestions for future action and research.

Answering the research questions required the researcher to identify impressions and experiences in a targeted group of site institutions. Given the amount of literature on the invisible college and pressures on sustainability of small private colleges for the near and long term, there was an opportunity for research with admissions directors (Astin & Lee, 1971; Barshay, 2018; Selingo, 2013; Tarrant et al., 2017; Thompson, 2017; Zemsky et al., 2020). The research questions in the study were:

1. What is admissions directors' level of understanding about the impending 2020–2030 enrollment crisis at small, less-selective, private Catholic colleges and universities in New England?

2. What is the role of admissions directors at small, less-selective, private Catholic colleges and universities in New England in the institutional response to the enrollment crisis?

The themes that emerged from the study follow. Theme 1 is the level of understanding of impending enrollment crisis and has subthemes of (a) declining high school students and mobility, (b) increased competition, (c) NACAC Code of Ethics changes, (d) goal achievement, and (e) cost and value. Theme 2 is the enrollment crisis effect on institutional sustainability, with subthemes of (a) college closures, (b) new initiatives, (c) budgets, revenue, and resources, and (d) mission. Theme 3 is the role of admissions directors and sphere of influence, with subthemes (a) supervisors and admissions directors, (b) stakeholders (faculty), and (c) presidents. Contributing to these themes were uneven experiences, overall knowledge, and limitations on contributions to the campus environment determined by reporting hierarchy.

Interpretation of Findings

Although the participants' perspectives varied due to the independent nature of the institutions and their own career paths, each admissions director contributed to each of the three themes with varying contributions to subthemes. They all experienced some level of promotion to their current roles at which they exhibited from some to significant understanding of the impending enrollment crisis, which influenced the intensity of the work they do and manage.

Theme 1: Level of Understanding of Impending Enrollment Crisis

All participants expressed concerns regarding the impending enrollment crisis, albeit with a disparity in depth of knowledge about the contributing factors. There is prolific literature regarding the birth dearth causing declining high school graduate numbers in the Northeast, with the origin dating to the recession in 2008 (Barshay, 2018; Bransberger & Michelau, 2016; Grawe, 2018). Measuring the impact of this decline through 2030 on the number of institutions within New England is in relation to available postsecondary options (Eide, 2019; Hill, 2018; NECHE, 2019a).

Only one admissions director expressed knowledge of birth dearth but without using that term, instead referencing "declining high school students." Just one participant had read Grawe's (2018) book on the subject and others were unaware of the topic completely. A single participant mentioned WICHE data as a source of information useful for understanding and planning on the job (Bransberger & Michelau, 2016). Admissions directors' level of experience and time in the profession contributed to their connection to data, both campus and external. Newer, less-experienced admissions directors did not discuss the use of data to address challenges.

All eight of the admissions directors were goal-focused and discussed concerns meeting their recruitment goals for the institutions. The most significant challenge was increased competition from other colleges and universities based on new programs and tuition discounts. Participants did not identify their competition as Catholic colleges or those with similar selectivity as their own; however, they were all aware which competitor institutions deployed certain tactics and the need for their institution to adjust. These tactics largely pertained to scholarship offers and discounted financial aid rates.

Predictable competition and issues are part of the job as described by the admissions directors. There are ongoing changes that create additional challenges and stressors. One distressing adjustment discussed by all the admissions directors was a change to NACAC's Code of Ethics and Professional Practices (CEPP) in September 2019, which eliminated the deposit commitment date of May 1, when students committed to a college and other colleges discontinued recruitment efforts (NACAC, 2019). The admissions directors were anxious about what the change would mean for meeting their goals on top of the usual challenges. Although this change is concerning, admissions directors appeared to lack real planning to address it.

Theme 2: Enrollment Crisis Effect on Institutional Sustainability

The findings showed that although all admissions directors were aware of college closures in New England, none felt their institution was at immediate risk of closing. College closures are disconcerting for the admissions directors, all of whom found themselves impacted by the mergers and closures of Marlboro College, Mount Ida College, and Newbury College (Eide, 2019; EY Parthenon, 2016; Jaschik, 2019a). A Propublica review for each of the participating institutions showed varying net income and, in some cases, deficits (Schwencke, Tigas, Wei, Glassford & Roberts, 2019). The admissions directors at the schools with weak financials did not mention institutional financial weakness or indicate awareness in any way. The one admissions director who said he was wary of the future had previously worked at a college that had closed. His worry was specific to the future of the higher education industry in general and his institution to a degree, despite a strong endowment and strong net revenue (McGee, 2015).

Emphasis on strategy, not Catholic affiliation. It was clear that the admissions directors connected their recruitment success to the institution’s long-term success and sustainability. Long-term viability is dependent on enrollment at each of these institutions. Researchers have studied small, invisible colleges since the 1970s looking specifically at low enrollment and low selectivity, which was the profile of both the institutions in the study and those that closed (Astin & Lee, 1971; McGee, 2015; Tarrant et al., 2017). The most recent work by Zemsky at el. (2020) indicates a bleak future for some. The Catholic affiliation and concern of viability did not arise during interviews, despite being a niche within small, private colleges (O'Loughlin, 2018). Optimism and proactive effort under the guise of strategy and strategic planning appear to shape the lens through which all the admissions directors in the study attempted to reconcile declining high school graduation numbers, competition, and sustainability (Blumenstyk, 2013; Hossler & Kalsebeek, 2013; Newman et al., 2004; Nguyen, 2019; Pucciarelli & Kaplan, 2016; Selingo, 2013). Of interest was the admissions directors' focus on mission as a contributor to retention, not an initial recruitment draw to the institution. It would be understandable for a director of admissions to talk about mission in terms of recruiting opportunities; instead, participants discussed mission as a contributing factor for fit (student and institution) attributed to shaping the class. The high acceptance rate for these institutions suggests the colleges are not exactly 'shaping' their entering classes by 'fit' but admitting volume necessary to yield a class of first-time students (IPEDS, 2019).

All participating institutions are moving toward the future by building new facilities and adding new programs, technologies, and sports. It is unknown if the institutions are eliminating anything, as the admissions directors did not call attention to anything negative even if it could be beneficial, further supporting the theory that the Catholic culture at colleges is weak (Morey & Piderit, 2006). Budgets received wide discussion regarding resources available for recruiting and staffing (Lapovsky & McKeown-Moak, 1999). All eight admissions directors stressed the advantage of having more resources to recruit by way of additional staff and increased institutional exposure, which would assist them in meeting goals.

Theme 3: Role of Admissions Director and Sphere of Influence

The findings showed that the role of admissions directors and their sphere of influence on their campuses in the institutional response to the enrollment crisis is limited, but heavily depended upon for meeting institutional objectives. In interviews, all admissions directors indicated that they are responsible for meeting the recruitment goal for their institutions, a role none of them took lightly, as they discussed the job, role, and changes, such as those to the CEPP (NACAC, 2020; Phair, 2014). Disconnection from the ramifications of not meeting goals was evident relative to discussions about their supervisors. Specifically, the admissions directors all discussed the work and lengths to which they must go to accomplish the work; however, not one of the eight expressed concern of possible termination.

The admissions directors discussed little about strategy or strategic planning, focusing more on tactics while moving at an incredible pace (Kooli, 2019). The lack of focus on strategic planning likely contributes to having significant responsibility to and for the institution but not feeling at risk of termination. Participants described their role as having responsibility but no real sphere of influence on campus beyond that of their supervisor, usually a vice president (Phair, 2014). Additionally, the admissions directors were adaptable and willing to do whatever it took to accomplish their work. As such, admissions directors must be flexible, able to make midcourse adjustments and alter plans to meet enrollment goals as circumstances change (Blumenstyk, 2013; Newman et al., 2004), as discussed by the eight participants. Although admissions directors may not have a wide sphere of influence, they effectively handle what they face with every circumstance.

Participants identified the relationship and trust between themselves and their supervisors as important, something also supported by the literature (Coleman, 2017; Fullan, 2001). Each of the eight admissions directors identified their connection with and the availability of the supervisor as beneficial. This strong relationship was likely the reason admissions directors felt disconnected from the consequence of a missed recruitment goal because they work closely together and communicate often. Although it is the responsibility of the admissions directors to meet recruitment goals, the vice president to whom the position reports is largely responsible for the strategy from which the admissions directors build a tactical plan. This structure means that admissions directors could fail to meet recruitment goals as a result of a strategy determined by someone else and, therefore, believe the failure is not their fault.

The admissions directors primarily identified faculty as campus stakeholders. Admissions directors shared both positive and negative feelings about working with faculty, ranging from enjoying them as individuals and frustration in working with them as an overall entity. It would be ideal if the admissions directors' sphere of influence extended to faculty; however, that did not seem to be the case. Admissions directors did not view faculty as helpful, but as a force with which they must deal. The admissions directors felt they had wasted time explaining their role and the need for efforts, receiving just unilateral support. Shared governance and the role of faculty are contributing factors related to the less-than-ideal connection between faculty and admissions directors in the study, and with regard to the complexity of faculty and administration in general (Del Favero & Bray, 2005; McGee, 2015).

The admissions directors desired communication and information and expressed the need for details as soon as they are available. Boyer (2016) supported admissions directors' need for information as it evolves, not just once it is complete. There were disparate descriptions of the connection, communication, and information-sharing on the part of college presidents. Admissions directors were a level removed from the president at seven of the institutions, with one participant reporting being two levels removed. Participants described college presidents as having different approaches to communication on campus; some admissions directors had opportunities to communicate with staff and administration, whereas others had few occasions to do so. Kotter (2010) noted that communication is vital to successful implementation. The admissions directors need this connection to do their jobs effectively.

Implications for Theory

Chapter 2 included descriptions of conceptual and theoretical frameworks, with the conceptual framework identified as employee engagement. The two theoretical models were expectancy theory and LMX. The conceptual and theoretical frameworks were consistent with the themes and findings of the study, as discussed in the following sections.

Employee Engagement

The study's conceptual framework of employee engagement highlights employees' commitment and connection to work to achieve goals for an organization (Biggs et al., 2014; Kahn, 1990). The eight admissions directors in the study exhibited strong employee engagement through strong connectivity to the work to be done, strong communication needs, and strong relationships with their supervisors reinforced by support (Cartwright & Holmes, 2006; Martin, 2018). Communication is an important component of effective engagement, from the organization to the employees, fostering connection (Curry, 1992; Flynn, 2019; Kotter, 2010).

As discussed in the literature, relationships are essential to achieving the goals of an organization (Flynn, 2019; Fullan, 2001; Gallup, 2018b). Strong emotional intelligence is a component of effective relationship-building, leading and contributing to employee engagement (Fullan, 2001). In addition, to be invested in the institution, employees also look up to the traits of the leader, which is the relationship to their supervisors described by the admissions directors (Flynn, 2019; Gallup, 2018a, 2018b). A common career trajectory in higher education is from the position of director of admissions to vice president for enrollment management (Higher Ed Jobs, 2020; LinkedIn, 2020). Therefore, it could be presumed that the admissions directors are both amenable to and in pursuit of connectivity to their supervisors for learning all they can to move up in their career, creating natural and effective employee engagement.

These relationships are vital for effective employee engagement and built on trust to meet institutional recruitment goals (Albrecht, 2010; Balwant, 2019; Mishra et al., 2014). Trust is another important component of the relationship of follower to leader, or in this case, admissions directors to vice presidents (Albrecht, 2010; Mishra, et al., 2014). Inherent in positive employee engagement is also goal achievement for the organization (Fullan, 2001). The admissions directors all discussed meeting enrollment goals, which they considered to be of utmost importance. Given the goal attainment focus of the work of the admissions directors, it was not surprising that each participant related being effectively satisfied and engaged as employees, as indicated in their interviews and supported by the literature (Gallup, 2018b; Head, 2009).

Expectancy Theory

Expectancy theory (Vroom, 1964) is a behavioral theory indicating that motivated employees who believe their strong efforts will lead to strong output will perform as expected

(Lunenburg, 2011; Northouse, 2016). Mitchell (1982) identified goal setting as a key attribute contributing to people working harder. This framework supported the efforts of admissions directors to reach their goals, working consistently toward the institutions' established needs. Even as the institutions' needs change, the admissions directors adapt and keep the pace until the last possible opportunity to enroll a new class.

Expectancy theory is based specifically on the follower (Northouse, 2016). Although the follower (admissions director) drives the motivation to perform and to receive rewards, active participation by the supervisor (vice president for enrollment) is necessary (Gaffney, 2018). Valence, the reward an employee expects from achieving goals, appeared to be nothing more than personal and professional satisfaction, supplemented by the appreciation of their vice president and president (Vroom, 1964).

The motivation to perform and receive rewards must also be intrinsic to the work, as there is no opportunity for financial reward in the way of bonuses or incentives for recruiting students. The U.S. Department of Education (2012) is clear that no admissions representative shall be financially incentivized to recruit. The eight admissions directors described work that is at times grueling, both satisfying and unsatisfying, and largely not understood by campus stakeholders. Still, the admissions directors find motivation to reach goals and lead a team. Valence for admissions directors is goal attainment along with personal and professional satisfaction.

Leader-Member Exchange Theory

LMX is based on the dyadic relationship between the supervisor and the employee (Northouse, 2016). As described in Chapter 2, LMX comprises in-groups and out-groups, with the in-groups enjoying more engagement, communication, and organizational knowledge (Northouse, 2016). The in-group member is trusted by the leader and, as a result, develops a stronger working relationship and connection (Northouse, 2016). In this study, it was clear that the relationship between the supervisor, the vice president, and the admissions director is positive, with strong connection and communication. In this relationship. the admissions directors felt supported and were thus committed to the work they do.

As described by Dansereau, Graen, and Haga (1975), member benefits of the in-group could include receiving more information, gaining confidence, and, in turn, becoming more dependable, motivated, and communicative, which is favorable for the leader. Northouse (2016) identified the importance and significance of the leader's communication and its impact on the dyad. The eight admissions directors all described what could be characterized as constant communication between themselves and their supervisors, regardless of whether the supervisor had admissions experience. In other words, the connection of the roles creates interdependence on institutional outcomes, nearly forcing a positive dyadic relationship. The three admissions directors who had vice presidents without direct admissions experience still had strong relationships, exhibiting in-group behaviors despite the admissions directors' acknowledgement that unless someone has personally experienced a phenomenon such as travel season, it is difficult to understand what that phenomenon is like.

Recommendations for Action

The position of director of admissions is a wide-ranging job with significant responsibility and accountability, yet little voice to contribute what they know. The role is critical because of the benefits of success or ramifications of failure on the institution. In explaining their roles on campus, participants provided components of the job description without discussing their larger contribution to the institutions beyond meeting recruitment goals. Institutions could be better aligned by giving admissions directors a voice in relation to the job they do. Every tuition-dependent, small Catholic college in this study needs new student enrollment to be secure. It is important to hear from those in admissions director positions what students are looking for and what would draw them to the institution. Likewise, if the admissions directors and their staff are unable to recruit students for some programs, college leadership might consider the possibility of cutting some programs.

It is also understandable that the admissions directors are not necessarily well-read on the topics that affect them in their profession, such as the birth dearth and demographic data. One admissions director described being "in the weeds," viewing the work as tactical while leaving strategy to the supervisors. Although more professional development would be beneficial to increase their knowledge about aspects affecting higher education, the admissions directors would need to spend time deep in strategy before they can see the value of devoting this time to learning.

One admissions director talked about monthly "extended cabinet" meetings in which the president and cabinet bring together deans and directors. Such meetings would be an opportunity for the admissions directors to learn, and perhaps for the president to hear and learn from the admissions directors. Senior leadership has the holistic view of the institution and the vice presidents communicate information to the directors; directors, in turn, are in the trenches working with students, families, the community, and school counselors. Improved communication channels are necessary.

Operations and data personnel were responsible for sending out the weekly admissions reports at seven of eight of the represented institutions. One admissions director reported having responsibility for providing context and communication to the institution with the weekly admissions report. Data analysis showed that institutions are highly dependent on admissions directors. Leadership should evaluate their impressions of the role and whether they are willing to listen. One admissions director had strong opinions on the lack of student life on campus, indicating that improvement in that area would draw more resident students. This was an example of the admissions director having information a campus president could use in an institutional response to the impending enrollment crisis.

Recommendations for Further Study

Further study is recommended regarding the role of the vice president for enrollment, the most common supervisor of the admissions directors. A qualitative study to uncover the experiences, knowledge, role, and sphere of influence of the vice president would be beneficial to campus leadership. Additionally, an examination of the relationship between the admissions director and the vice president for enrollment may provide a more complete understanding of the needs of the admissions director. An assessment such as this could determine which role is more accountable for achieving the recruitment goal for new students.

Participants in the study revealed deep concern regarding changes to the CEPP for recruitment (NACAC, 2019). Although it was not clear whether all the admissions directors had a full understanding of the original CEPP guidance, they all knew the implications of removed components and the lack of enforcement because of the U.S. Department of Justice antitrust investigation (Jaschik, 2019b). Although the universal deposit date for new students to commit to a college remains May 1, the elimination of a section of the CEPP now allows for recruitment of committed students after May 1, a practice previously not permitted (Burge, 2018). NACAC is nonetheless encouraging member institutions not to change their recruitment practices, notwithstanding the voted-on changes to the CEPP (NACAC, 2019). Despite this request and recommendation from NACAC, it is unknown what the impact of the changes will be on the recruitment tactics and behaviors of competing colleges, affecting an institution's yield. The distress of this change was evident among all eight admissions directors.

Conclusion

Employee engagement served as the conceptual theory for this qualitative study, framed by two theoretical frameworks of expectancy theory and LMX. The researcher used IPA to research admissions directors' understanding of the birth dearth and the role they have in the institutional response to the impending enrollment crisis at small, less-selective, private, Catholic colleges and universities in New England. The conceptual and theoretical frameworks provided the structure for assessing the research questions to arrive at the study's findings. The experiences and understanding of eight admissions directors at eight small, private, Catholic colleges and universities in New England shaped the study's three findings.

The first finding for Theme 1, level of understanding of impending enrollment crisis, shows the degree of knowledge admissions directors do and do not have regarding the factors that contribute to the impending enrollment crisis. Participants did not discuss the reduced birth rates that created the birth dearth as the reason for declining high school graduation between 2020 and 2030. Understanding the underlying reasons for recruitment challenges admissions directors will face could contribute to developing strategy and applying the appropriate tactics.

The finding for Theme 2, enrollment crisis effect on institutional sustainability, showed that college closures were on the mind of every admissions director in the study. However, not one of the admissions directors was immediately concerned about their institution closing. The literature indicates the possibility of college closures based on economics as well as what is unknown on college campuses, even to the people who work there (Jaschik, 2018a).

Theme 3, role of admissions directors and sphere of influence, showed that admissions directors' influence is limited and simultaneously depended upon. All the admissions directors described their role in tactical terms and focused more on functionality than influence on campus. Given the responsibility of the position at tuition-dependent institutions, it is unfortunate that the admissions directors have limited exposure or inclusion to be a better resource for the colleges and universities.

Colleges and universities are dependent on the success of recruitment efforts led by the director of admissions. The admissions directors have enough surface knowledge to do the work related to demographic shifts but could be better served by increased understanding. The work they do to yield a class can seem endless and both stressful and gratifying, whether they succeed or fail to meet recruitment goals. The admissions directors take the work personally and are deeply connected to the institution, their supervisors, the work, the effort it takes, and the eventual outcome. Too few of the admissions directors had a wide enough sphere of influence on campus to provide information for supporting new initiatives that would contribute to long-term sustainability. They also lacked the leverage to contribute to the discontinuation of a program. Institutions could benefit more from the dedicated work of the admissions directors with inclusion and connection to decision-making that affects recruitment efforts.

End note: All data collection occurred before the COVID-19 pandemic hit the United States, leading colleges and universities to temporarily eliminate on-campus instruction and move students off campus. It is important to note that the research outlined in Chapter 2 highlighted college closures and invisible colleges without factoring in the current pandemic. In an interview with *The Chronicle of Higher Education,* Robert Zemsky, one of the coauthors of *The College Stress Test* (Zemsky et al., 2020), stated that the coronavirus could be "an existential moment for 20% of institutions" in addressing sustainability (Wescott, 2020).

As discussed, admissions directors must adapt to circumstances and change. No time has this been more evident than now, with the rapid changes associated with the global pandemic of COVID-19. At the time of the interviews in late February and early March 2020, the admissions directors did not have a pandemic on their radar. As of late March 2020, colleges across the United States are dealing with change in light of the spread of infection. The admissions directors in this study are now pivoting to creating online versions of what they planned for recruiting for their institutions, with no ability to interact in person with prospective students. Although leadership will likely appreciate their work, there is likely a new worry as to whether they will make their classes as previously considered when interviewed for the study.

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Appendix A

E-mail Invitation for Research Study Participation

Subject: Research Study Participant Request

Dear [Name],

I am currently a doctoral student at the University of New England working on my dissertation, *Admissions Directors' Understanding of the Enrollment Crisis at New England Catholic Colleges.* This is a multisite research project for which I am looking to interview eight to 10 volunteers who are known as the admissions director as the department head who supervises a staff of counselor or recruiters and is responsible for recruitment and enrollment of new first-time, full-time undergraduate students; also known as the chief admissions officer. I am hopeful that you will be one of them.
Participant information:

- Interviews will be conducted either in person or online through Skype or Zoom, or phone and are expected to last approximately 45 to 90 minutes.

- At the time of the interview, a consent form will be reviewed and signed. An interview occurring online will use an electronic signature, and an e-mailed form is acceptable.

- Volunteers will have an opportunity to review a transcript of the interview to ensure accuracy.

- Participant identity and institution information will be protected and masked.

I know you are very busy, and I would be most appreciative of your participation and respectful of your time. Please let me know if you would like to schedule an interview or if I can provide any additional information about the research study. I may be reached at kschedin@une.edu.

Thank you in advance,

Karen H. Schedin
Doctoral Candidate, University of New England

Appendix B

Interview Protocol

Name of Interviewer: Karen H. Schedin

Pseudonym: TBD

Date of Interview: TBD

Location: TBD

Greeting and Initial Interaction

Good Afternoon, [Participant]. I appreciate your willingness to meet with me and the time to interview you for my research study. As I mentioned, I am a doctoral student at the University of New England in the online EdD program for Transformative Leadership. The title of my study is *Admissions Directors' Understanding of the Enrollment Crisis at New England Catholic Colleges.* This is a multisite study with a focus on understanding the individuals' perspectives related to the current climate of change on campus associated with the impending enrollment crisis.

Thank you for reviewing the consent form. Do you have any questions about it before you sign it?

Your admissions role, experiences with institutional change this institution has likely had, challenges and successes, are ideal for my research, and I seek to understand your experiences. This interview is for research purposes, and I will be transcribing the interview, as well. Would you allow me to record it for transcription for my course so that I may more easily listen and interact than note take?

Before we begin, do you have any questions or concerns that you need me to address?

Thank you.

Opening

Let's begin with background information about you.

Do you have a preferred pseudonym for me to use for you? Yes? What is it? ___________ If not, may I select one for you? __________

May I ask your age? _______ Gender/Identity? _______________

What is your highest degree earned? _________________ In what program? ______________

Current job title: ____

How many years have you worked at this institution? ______________

How long have you worked in higher education? __________________

How long have you worked in Catholic higher education? ________________

Have you worked at another private institution?   Yes   No

Have you worked at a public higher education institution?   Yes   No

How many other higher education institutions have you worked at? _____________

How many years have you worked in admissions? ______________

Thank you for providing me with some background information.

General Career Questions

How did you get started in the admissions profession, and how did you get to this current role?

Can you please provide a general overview of your role and responsibilities?

Would you please describe any opportunity for career development you have had?

As you have increased your level of responsibility, have you received mentorship?

Would you describe that experience? (This question may or may not be asked depending on the answer to the first question in this section.)

Reporting and Leadership

To whom (title) does your position report? _________________________________. To whom does that position report? ____

Who reports to you? ____

Can you describe any benefits or challenges related to new student recruitment?

What types of meetings, documents, or reports do you share with the President or senior leadership? How often?

Recruitment and Enrollment

Tell me about your role here?

What are the things that you do in your role?

What are your biggest priorities regarding recruiting and enrolling a class?

What are your institution's strengths and opportunities for recruiting and enrolling a class?

What are your biggest challenges to your institution for recruitment and enrolling a class?

What do you wish people on your campus knew regarding the concerns and challenges you described?

What do you wish your supervisor knew regarding the concerns and challenges you described? The president?

What do you wish people on your president knew regarding the concerns and challenges you described?

Are you able to, do you, or have you had the opportunity to discuss enrollment challenges with the president? Describe, please.

Are you able to, do you, or have you had the opportunity to discuss enrollment challenges with the Board of Trustees? Describe please.

Has your campus president discussed, to your knowledge, enrollment concerns?

What kinds of things has the president asked or commented about related to recruitment challenges?

Is there concern on campus about meeting enrollment goals (new students) and the impact on campus viability?

Closing:
[Participant], thank you for taking the time to meet with me. If there is anything else you think helpful for me to add, please contact me at your convenience at any of the following:
kschedin@une.edu Cell phone: (xxx) xxx-xxxx[4]

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[4] Researcher's personal cell phone number has been removed at time of publication.

Appendix C

University of New England Consent for Participation in Research

Project Title: Admissions Directors' Understanding of the Enrollment Crisis at New England Catholic Colleges

Principal Investigator(s): Karen H. Schedin, University of New England

kschedin@une.edu Phone: (xxx) xxx-xxxx[5]

Introduction:

- Please read this form. You may also request that the form is read to you. The purpose of this form is to give you information about this research study, and if you choose to participate, document that choice.
- You are encouraged to ask any questions that you may have about this study, now, during, or after the project is complete. You can take as much time as you need to decide whether or not you want to participate. Your participation is voluntary.

Why is this research study being done?

The study seeks to document the experiences of admissions directors experiencing change impacted by the impending enrollment crisis impacting small, regional, less-selective, Catholic colleges and universities in New England.

Who will be in this study?

Participants will be directors responsible for recruitment and enrollment of new full-time, first-time undergraduate students and selected from similar institutions based on enrollment size of first-time, first-year students, and total undergraduate enrollment.

What will I be asked to do?

If you agree to participate in this research study, your participation will include an interview that will take approximately 45-90 minutes and be recorded. The researcher will discuss and review the consent form at the beginning of the interview and obtain your signature. Online participants will sign electronically, and an e-mailed consent form is acceptable.

What are the possible risks of taking part in this study?

There are no foreseeable risks associated with the research, and participants can refuse to answer questions at any time for any reason.

[5] Researcher's personal cell phone number has been removed at time of publication.

What are the possible benefits of taking part in this study?

There may be no personal benefit from your participation, but the knowledge received may be of value to other college administrators. Participation could also be of value to others studying change understanding the leadership impact during a tumultuous enrollment cycle.

What will it cost me?

There is no cost to participants for participation.

How will my privacy be protected?

- The site and your name will be masked using pseudonyms.
- A neutral site will be selected and used for the interview.
- The results of the study will be published in a doctoral dissertation that will be accessible through ProQuest Central.

How will my data be kept confidential?

- All documents will be kept in a locked cabinet by the researcher for the duration of the study.
- Electronic files will be kept on the researcher's laptop that is password protected.
- The audio recordings from the interviews will be maintained by the principal researcher and deleted at the completion of the study.
- A copy of your consent form will be maintained by the principal investigator for at least 3 years after the project is complete before being destroyed. The form will be kept in a locked cabinet and the location will not be associated with data collected during the study.

What are my rights as a research participant?

- Your participation is voluntary. Your decision to participate will have no impact on your current or future relations with the University.
- Your decision to participate will not affect your relationship with the researcher.
- You may skip or refuse to answer any question for any reason.
- If you choose not to participate, there is no penalty to you, and you will not lose any benefits that you are otherwise entitled to receive.
- You are free to withdraw from this research study at any time, for any reason.
    - If you choose to withdraw from the research, there will be no penalty to you, and you will not lose any benefits that you are otherwise entitled to receive.
- You will be informed of any significant findings developed during the course of the research that may affect your willingness to participate in the research.
- If you sustain an injury while participating in this study, your participation may be ended.

What other options do I have?

- You may choose not to participate as participation is voluntary.

Who may I contact with questions?

- The researcher conducting this study is Karen Schedin. For questions or more information you may contact her directly at (xxx) xxx-xxxx or kschedin@une.edu.
- If you choose to participate in this research study and believe you may have suffered a research-related injury, please contact Laura Bertonazzi, EdD, at the University of New England at (207) 602-2010 or lbertonazzi@une.edu.
- If you have any questions or concerns about your rights as a research subject, you may call Mary Bachman DeSilva, ScD, Chair of the UNE Institutional Review Board at (207) 221-4567 or irb@une.edu.

Will I receive a copy of this consent form?

- You will be given a copy of this consent form.

Participant's Statement

I understand the above description of this research and the risks and benefits associated with my participation as a research subject. I agree to take part in the research and do so voluntarily.

______________________________ ______________

Participant's signature or Legally authorized representative — Date

____

Printed name

Researcher's Statement

The participant named above had sufficient time to consider the information, had an opportunity to ask questions, and voluntarily agreed to be in this study.

______________________________ ______________

Researcher's signature — Date

____

Printed name