Integrated Research Design Prospectus

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DEL Residency 3

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Ready, Set, Think: A Study on the Role of Leader Mindset in Higher Education

Institutional Turnaround (*working title*)

Introduction

It is important to focus my topic and flesh out the context and purpose for this study. These initial sections are designed to establish my goals for this study as well as the importance of addressing the topic of successful academic turnaround and the role that leader mindset plays.

Intellectual, Practical, and Professional Goals

My personal goals for this study include the motivation to better understand the complex system of higher education and its administration as I work to move deeper into the field. Since I have been working in higher education – particularly in small to mid-sized institutions – for much of the last decade, I have a vested interest to understand how institutions turnaround successfully and how they thrive. My suspicion as I have experienced first-hand two very different yet in some ways struggling institutions is that the mindset of the leader – risk propensity, fiscal allocation, ambidexterity, academic capitalism – plays a large role in accomplishing successful turnarounds. I am motivated to find out if that mindset includes aspects of breaking pathways and aspects of instilling trust or creating buy-in.

Beyond personal interest, I hold professional goals to contribute something of value to the field of successful higher education models. Specific to small and mid-sized institutions who are largely tuition dependent (as opposed to funded through large endowments or through research), I am interested how not just innovative thinking and plans contribute to successful turnaround but also how leader mindset and capabilities play into culture, influence, and implementation across the institution. I am also hoping this paper will create credibility for me in the field of higher education administration, particularly in terms of organizational turnaround

and innovative leadership. Currently, in the higher education landscape, we turn to "tried and true" best practices, but we often only look to other higher education institutions for those practices. In our current environment, I don't think we can rely on these best practices or on what we have already done and must look at innovation by researching and discovering analogous models outside of higher education.

Practically speaking, I would hope that this study will provide something of value to the field. If we can understand how leader mindset figures into the equation, perhaps we can stem the tide of small to mid-sized institutional closures by better training our leaders or by better choosing the right leaders for the institutions. Currently, we have seen many smaller, tuition-driven institutions close, often due to financial crises related to lowered enrollment as birthrates in certain parts of the country experience population declines, various economic crises such as the 2008-2001 downturn and the 2020-2021 COVID pandemic (Butrymowicz & D'Amato, 2020) that required institutions to pivot to online learning, lose revenue-generating opportunities such as dorm living, performance venues, and building rentals, and spend additional funds to safely operate such as additional cleaning, weekly testing, and contact tracing or quarantining measures.

On the other hand, we have seen some institutions thrive during this time, as they have taken advantage of innovative solutions, alternate delivery models, or new opportunities to generate revenue such as workplace certifications, new majors designed for the current workforce, or partnerships across unique sectors. If we can understand what it is about leadership – presidents, administration, boards – mindset, we just might be able to impact the viability of higher education institutions. As anchor tenants in their communities, institutions of higher education provide economic boon to the cities and towns they are located in. Additionally, they

proved important workforce training and contribute to either "brain gain" or "brain drain" in their communities and are key to providing access and pathway to socio economically disadvantaged, students, students of color, and other non-privileged groups.

Intellectually, I would like to understand not just motivation and innovation but how that leader mindset applies and contributes to a successful turnaround. This may lead to questions of how a president interacts with those above – the board of trustees – and those below – faculty, administration, and staff. In other words, I would like to understand how leader mindset transforms into buy-in above and below a president in the process of organizational turnaround.

Problem

As mentioned, institutions of higher education are not only anchor tenants that contribute to the health and economy of their surrounding communities but are also gateways to a better life for both the students they provide access to and the companies who hire those highly trained and skilled graduates. If we can understand how leader mindset contributes to successful turnarounds and/or thriving institutions, then we can potentially have better understanding of how to hire leaders with the right mindset or can potentially train leaders to adopt and adapt more appropriate mindsets that lead to success.

Often, identifying innovations can be the easy part; it is in convincing others to take the risk that is the difficult part and where I suspect leader mindset plays a role. I would hope my findings could be applied toward building the trust and convincing others to take the leap outside of what is comfortable and known into new territory that could have significant, positive impact. This could lead to making a difference for struggling institutions, the surrounding ecosystems, including economic and social underpinnings, and for the students and workers who rely on these institutions.

Some of the gaps include:

- Whether implementing best practices buys time to put innovations in place

- If and how obstacles to innovation can be overcome

- What other models could we study for innovations

- If there is potential to change or train leader, board, or faculty mindset

Conceptual Framework

The most important themes and theories that inform this work are path dependency, dynamic capabilities, and risk propensity with a potential fourth area of fiscal allocation.

Path Dependency

In terms of path dependency, it is important to understand the lock-in that often occurs in institutions that are often over 100 years old. Leaders in higher ed are often fighting a system that holds both growth and tradition. While the setting includes an aspect of continual improvement and is often filled with faculty who continually want to grow, teach the next generations, and co-create knowledge, it's also a setting of tradition where people sometimes cannot see beyond tradition to open their eyes to new ways of thinking. This can create lock-in of only delivering learning in a certain way, relying on "best practices" that are stale and imitative at best, or in an inability to try new or innovative ideas in administration and practice.

Path dependency has its roots in evolutionary biology (Boulton, et al., 2015) and has itself evolved as a concept with influences from economics, sociology, political science, and business domains (R. G. Wylie, personal conversation, August 5, 2020). In essence, path dependency refers to how specific events and choices in the past affect and limit choices in the future (Fortwengel & Keller, 2020). It's important to understand that companies often create this dependency through their culture and values and, in a way, can become prisoners of deeply

ingrained ideas, assumptions, or worldviews (Teece, 2007, p. 1322). Dorst (2015) called this becoming "trapped by their habits" (p. 15) and warned that trying to solve a problem by ways that always worked in the past could lead to an inability to go beyond earlier ways of thinking.

Dynamic Capabilities

Teece, et al, (1997) established dynamic capabilities as those capabilities that enable firms to "integrate, build, and reconfigure internal and external competences to address rapidly changing environments" (LT PAGE NUMBER). Organizations – including those in higher education (Hayter & Cahoy, 2018) – need to utilize these capabilities such as sensing and seizing and nimble resource allocation to support vision, new ideas, and innovation as they not only navigate a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous world (Schoemaker, et al., 2018) but also break paths and seek out success. One way to do this certainly includes the concept of ambidexterity, combining both exploration and exploitation. Nooteboom (2010) noted exploitation, or the efficient use of existing resources, is necessary for companies to survive in the short term while exploration, or searching out the unknown and changing existing patterns, is necessary for long-term survival (p. 3). For IHEs, this may mean continuing the traditional educational methods and modes while also exploring less traditional partnerships, alternate delivery modes, or new types of degrees or certificates. It could also mean looking for analogous models within other contexts or fields.

Along with organizational dynamic capabilities, we have to think about what Beck & Wiersma (2013) called dynamic managerial capabilities. Utilizing the direct abilities and experiences (human capital), relational goodwill and support (social capital), and mental models, framing, and interpretation (cognition), managers are able to direct their organization's strategy

within the context of the organization. There is a direct connection between dynamic managerial capabilities and firm performance through a path of resource allocation and strategy decisions.

Risk Propensity

As leaders in higher education look to break path dependency and work to incorporate ambidexterity into their organizations, they must be willing to take a certain amount of risk. Bywater & Lewis (2017) noted risk propensity as a trait that is most helpful in rapidly changing and complex environments (p. 23), and later Bywater (2019) included risk propensity in his "Leadership Ready Reckoner" as a top characteristic to keep a leader in his or her role (p. 22). Sudrajat (2015) tied entrepreneurial mindset – "creativity, motivation, and propensity to take risks" – to the competitive advantages of the firm, similar to Beck & Wiersma's (2013) findings on how the dynamic managerial capabilities of the leader can impact the organization.

Jung, et al. (2020) alluded to the mitigating effect risk-taking mentality has on the ability to embrace change by helping organizations stay agile in the absence of rigid pass-fail mentalities and allowing for the ability to respond quickly to both threats and opportunities. Beyond empowering employees, Jung, et al. (2020) found risk-taking mindsets and task complexity have the ability to help people adapt to change. Dadkhah, et al. (2018) included broad perspective, long-term thinking, and risk taking as a few of the key attributes of a company culture that not only includes strategic foresight but also empowers employees to understand the value of new information and the ability to use that information.

Klein (2011) addressed the idea of risk propensity in his section on the myth of risk management and noted excessive planning can actually increase risks and never guarantees success (p. 239) and advocated for relying on resiliency rather than prevention of risks (p. 247). This mindset seems to parallel the entrepreneurial mindset Sudrajat (2015) advocated for and is

particularly applicable to the higher education context. Rubins (2007) built on Clark's (1998, 2004, 2005) work on the "entrepreneurial university" and wrote about academic capitalism in which IHEs can depend on a leader who is focused on balancing the traditional model of university as a knowledge institution with today's current funding and revenue needs. To bring that current, we can lean on Soliday's (2018) concepts of courageous leadership in which leaders are willing to take reasonable risks – those with safety nets – in order to break out of traditional paths and move into innovative solutions and models in order to thrive.

The question of entrepreneurial mindset and its effect on the organization includes ideas of innovation and ambidexterity. Rosing & Zacher (2017) explored individuals who balanced ideas of exploitation and exploration and found support for leaders who showed higher tolerance for ambidexterity having higher instances of innovation. This idea supports the impact of leaders and their mindset on the performance of the organization and ties back to Beck & Wiersma's (2013) model of dynamic managerial capabilities. The idea of ambidexterity and how he or she wields it – as separate functions as most research suggests or as integrated as Rosing & Zacher (2017) studied – includes aspects of the innovative and entrepreneurial leader's abilities in skills, relational access, and mental framing. A more entrepreneurial and innovative manager can affect IHEs and other organizations in their ability to see unique solutions to complex problems and can make the difference in creating a resilient culture in which organizations can thrive.

Fiscal Allocation

Finally, fiscal allocation plays a role in illustrating the leader's risk propensity. As Randy Bell once mentioned in class, leadership is partly a matter of resource allocation (R. Bell, personal communication, March 12, 2020). How budget is and is not spent can be a clear indication of culture, lock-in, and path dependence as well as an indication of risk propensity and

innovation. In fact, in terms of higher education, much of the discussion on resilience, innovation, and entrepreneurial mindset comes back to resource allocation. How much risk a leader is willing to take often shows in the bottom-line allocations he or she is willing to risk. Hayter & Cahoy (2018) focused on the competing demands for higher education institutions to both meet their institutional missions of contributing to society while engaging in entrepreneurial activities that help them meet financial goals and responsibilities.

Fiscal allocation also ties in with the discussion of dynamic capabilities if we look at what Hayter & Cahoy (2018) termed "strategic social responsibility" in which strategy, execution through dynamic capabilities, and support of policy and resources work together to accomplish both the mission and the economic thriving of a college or university (p. 26). This balance also plays a role in the fiscal models for struggling institutions and has implications as colleges consider deeper ambidexterity and other models beyond traditional "best practices" that may not provide the lasting change necessary to a successful turnaround.

Conceptual Framework

Conceptual Framework TIFFIN
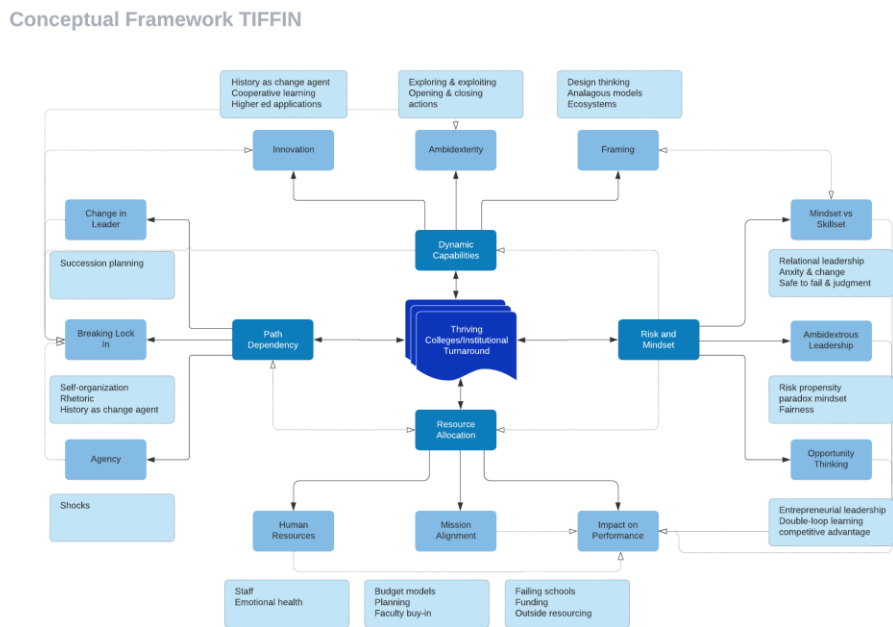
Research Questions

To narrow this study down, what I am hoping to learn is how a leader's mindset –

particularly in higher education institutions that are small to mid-sized and tuition dependent –

impacts the potential for turnaround. Specifically, I would like to understand if risk propensity

and the willingness to commit financial and human resources to a solution play a significant role

in encouraging or completing a successful turnaround in the situation of a failing institution. I

would like to learn if being willing to take a risk, to think more innovatively and less

traditionally in solutions, and to borrow or commit resources can create turnaround and what that

direct correlation between risk propensity and firm performance is. Additionally, I would like to

understand if these traits can be learned or must be hired for and if these leaders who possess

these traits can encourage the same in others and organizationally.

I think this question and the related questions mentioned would naturally get at the goal

of understanding how to break path dependence, especially in terms of engendered trust,

establishing a new culture of innovation, and establishing new patterns through process or

learning mindsets. Additionally, the question contributes to the goal of understanding the role of

academic capitalism and the idea of exploring innovative models beyond standard "best

practices" many higher education leaders fall back on. Finally, I think answering these related

questions could help the industry understand how to effectively train and/or hire leaders who

have the ability to instigate and implement turnaround within struggling institutions, leading to

answers in the realm of viable institutions.

The questions are deeply entwined with my conceptual framework, as the main question

and related speak directly to breaking path dependence by building trust, shaking up the

institution with new pathways (or even a new leader), and imagining new models and

frameworks. They also speak to understanding the impact of dynamic capabilities, including both that of managerial capabilities of the leader and that of the ambidexterity of the organization. Finally, the heart of the questions explore the risk propensity of the leader and how he or she allocates resources to impact the health of the organization.

Research Relationships

I hope it's not too tongue-in-cheek to not that I hope to establish collegial relationships with my research participants. Utilizing my network of both consultants and current board, faculty, and staff members at various colleges, I hope to find presidents who have been instrumental in higher education turnarounds. Ideally, these relationships will engender trust through explanation of what I am studying and my goals for the study, so that conversations will be free, open, and insightful. From my past work as a journalist and my previous and current roles in which I interact with donors, administrators, and speakers, I plan to translate my ability to establish rapport and trust through the interview process and welcome further and future interaction as interviewees wish.

There may be some influence in terms of connections with people like Joanne Soliday, a consultant who has worked in the space of higher education turnaround, and Deana Porterfield, a president at my former college of employment. While I believe these people and others can be influential in making connection and utilizing their network to help me find participants, I am hoping these relationships will not impede the openness of participants. Through my work with Advancement, I am often able to establish my own relationships with people that tend to run independent of the initial connection, so I am hopeful to find a good selection of colleges and presidents willing to speak openly with me.

Site & Participation Selection

I plan to study presidents of small to mid-sized colleges that are largely tuition dependent (as opposed to funded through large endowments or through sponsored research). Because I'd like to get at the mindset of leaders, particularly in terms of risk propensity, innovation, and fiscal allocations, it makes sense to focus on presidents who have been able to successfully implement a turnaround at a current or former institution. There is some argument for tangentially studying the board members who hired and managed that president and/or the faculty and staff who worked under that president. As I narrow my topic, I will see if this makes sense or if it will be best to focus solely on the presidents in question.

Theoretical considerations include my stance toward a constructivist or point of view in which participants are actively involved in co-creating knowledge (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). To understand how these president leaders have impacted turnaround requires conversation and collective sensemaking. Practical considerations include the fact that I am most interested in aspects of mindset that allowed or set up these presidents to be successful. That is best discovered in studying the presidents themselves. Though there is a case for tangentially studying those around them for context, I fell like the best data will come from the subjects themselves.

Data Collection

I am considering a couple of different but related data collection methods. The first – and most likely path – is phenomenological, semi-structured interviews. In order to get at the question of leader mindset and impact, it would stand that utilizing a method such as phenomenology would uncover how theses specific leaders make meaning of their mindset.

According to Merriam & Tisdell (2015), phenomenological interviews are useful in "get[ting] at the essence of the basic underlying structure of the meaning of an experience" (p. 27).

The other method I am considering is narrative inquiry. Part of the appeal of narrative inquiry is the expansion to meaning beyond simply personal experience. As Mertova & Webster (2020) noted, "people make sense of their lives according to the narratives available to them" (p. 2) and explained that narrative inquiry allows for researchers to present participant experience within their contexts and history. To me, this sounds like a way to ensure the data is thick and rich, compassing not just participant meaning making but also the context in which the story lies.

These two methods seem to me to be the best methods to capture the mindset of the leaders themselves. My goal is to understand how much risk propensity they have or had, how that risk propensity led or did not to innovative ideas and execution of those ides, and how they were able or not to get others onboard as they executed turnaround measures. While there may be a case for performing a case study or even a mixed methods study that incorporated the surrounding peripherals of financial decisions or surveys of board members, direct reports, and other faculty or staff, I am not sure if these would keep me focused on the mindset of the actual leader/president responsible for the turnaround at his or her institution. I remain open to these ideas but am strongly leaning toward either phenomenological or narrative inquiry data collection.

Data Analysis

I plan to utilize coding as my primary analysis method. Since I am newer to data analysis, I have obtained a few research books as guides, including Harding's (2018) guide to step-by-step analysis for qualitative methods. For my own benefit, I will likely create my own database of interviews, codes, responses, etc. to help me analyze. I am interested in researching and finding a

data analysis tool that could make this process easier or even create the database of themes. A former colleague of mine assessed her data not just in terms of coded responses and themes but also in terms of frequency of themes broken down by participant types (gender, age, years of experience), and I am wondering if I would be able to incorporate this type of information in my analysis or if it will be relevant or helpful to my study.

I suspect that themes will be extremely important to my study of mindset; if there are certain themes that arise more frequently or are more in common with multiple participants, it could inform the usefulness of the study for practical hiring and/or training purposes.

Validity Issues

Validity in qualitative studies holds a different meaning than in quantitative studies. While a quantitative study is focused on a tested instrument and the repeatability of the study, qualitative studies cannot rely on those since the primary instrument is the researcher. Instead, according to Merriam & Tisdell (2015), the key to validity and reliability in qualitative studies is the idea of the ethics of the researcher (p. 238). For me, this means my ethics as a researcher will be the highest potential threat to the study.

For example, the idea that I will find my participants through my network of college administrators and consultants in the field, there may be personal connections between myself and a given participant. I will need to be extremely careful to ensure the participants are free to remain anonymous by not letting my network know which of their connections is participating and/or repeating anything they shared with me in confidence. Since the data will be reported both in aggregate and anonymously, participants should be reasonably protected in terms of identity and any strategies or specifics they might share about their current or former institutions.

Additionally, I will need to leave any preconceived ideas out of my interviews and remain open to the truths and experiences participants share with me. To best representing the intent of the participants, I will employ several strategies noted by Merriam & Tisdell (2015), member checks during data analysis process and saturation of rich, thick data through multiple interviews.

Generalizability is also tricky in qualitative studies. Merriam & Tisdell (2015), noted reliability and generalizability rely more on the reader rather than the researcher (pp. 242, 254). For me, this means only the reader of the study can decide if the findings apply to their particular context. This doesn't mean I have no influence; rather, that I have to be as faithful as I can to present findings that are representative of my participants, that are not biased by preconceived notions I hold, and that are as clear as I can make them to give the reader enough information to make a decision for themselves in terms of relevance to their particular situation (M. Frank, personal communication, April 15, 2021).

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