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A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY: COVID-19 AND  
ADMINISTRATORS AT A CHRISTIAN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTION

BY

ROBERT DANIEL POCAI

A DOCTORAL DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE  
COLLEGE OF EDUCATION  
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE DOCTOR OF EDUCATION  
IN ORGANIZATIONAL LEADERSHIP

SOUTHEASTERN UNIVERSITY  
MAY 2022

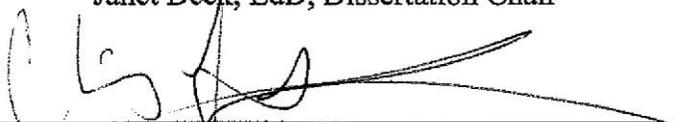
A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY: COVID-19 AND  
ADMINISTRATORS AT A CHRISTIAN  
HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTION  
BY  
ROBERT DANIEL POCAI

Dissertation Approved:



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Janet Deck, EdD, Dissertation Chair



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Chris Lohrstorfer, PhD, Committee Member



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James Shul, PhD Dean College of Education

## DEDICATION

First, this dissertation is dedicated to my Spirit led wife and best friend, Holly. I thank the Lord for her as we have journeyed together with Jesus. Together, with God's help, we have overcome cancer, persevered job changes, embraced ministry moves, and have enjoyed discipling our four children: Isabella, Ian, Ily Grace, and Iris. I am grateful for my immediate family who have been a tremendous blessing and support to me through this doctoral program. May my children remember that, as a father, I did not quit even when it got rough but to remember that we can do all things through Christ, who gives us strength.

Second, this dissertation is dedicated to my Jesus-following parents, Robert and Karen Pocai, who chose to follow Jesus in their lives, and that cultivated a desire in my heart to follow Him. They have been a source of godly wisdom, encouragement, and inspiration throughout my undergraduate, graduate, and post-graduate degrees. I will never forget my mother making me (a 40-year-old man) lunches for class at SEU, and my father being my chauffeur to and from campus. I will cherish those memories forever in Lakeland, FL.

Finally, this dissertation is dedicated to the late Dr. John E. Neihof, Jr. and his wife, Beth, for believing in me and my future as an administrator. Though tragically cut short, our 6 years together were God-ordained as two radical Jesus followers who were able to see the miraculous work of the Holy Spirit in resurrecting a seminary. As a mentor, teacher, friend, John's words and legacy will always live on in my heart. Jesus holds the end of this story.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This dissertation would not be possible without the direct assistance of Dr. Janet Deck, my dissertation chair. I would like to thank Dr. Deck for her faithful encouragement, direction, correction, and challenge that made me a better student and writer. Words alone cannot express my gratitude.

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I am grateful for Dr. Cassandra Lopez and Dr. Susan Stanley for their exceptional help during the editing of this dissertation. Their assistance has helped me become a better writer.

Finally, I am thankful that Jesus led me to Southeastern University. I have had an amazing experience being a doctoral student at this Christian university. To all my professors, I am grateful for their impact on my life that forged me into a better leader, a stronger follower of Jesus, and a relentless researcher and student.

## Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to describe the lived experience of administrators at a Christian higher education institution during the COVID-19 crisis. The theoretical framework used for this study was revolutionary change theory (RCT). Qualitative data was gathered from structured interviews with executive administrators who led during the COVID-19 pandemic at an evangelical Christian liberal arts university that offered multiple degrees at the associate, bachelor, master, and doctoral levels. Study findings described four main themes that emerged from the data: unpredictability, holistic community disruption, decisive adaptation, and team collaboration. These main themes described the lived phenomenon that the participants experienced during the COVID-19 crisis and were documented using descriptive phenomenological analysis that focused on words, phrases, and context of participants. As a result, a clear need exists for administrators to be prepared for future crises and potential pandemics. Innovation with delivery methods and staying missionally focused while experiencing revolutionary changes became significant to the administrators in this study.

*Key Words:* crisis; Revolutionary Change Theory; Christian higher education institution; traditional learning; online distance learning; e-learning; COVID-19; pandemic; stagility

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Who has not been impacted by the COVID-19 crisis? From the youngest to the oldest, from the wealthiest to the poorest, from small business to the large business, from nation to nation, and from the lowest grade to the highest grade in education, COVID-19 has affected the world. In Christian Higher Education Institutions (CHEIs), COVID-19 has had an effect. Research is needed to track the extent of COVID-19's effect on CHEI, administrators, and students, as navigating a pandemic has become pivotal in their educational context. In response to the COVID-19 crisis, CHEI administrators had to pivot quickly to effective alternative educational delivery methods in order to stabilize enrollment in their institutions. The pandemic offered little room for administrators to delay, research, and analyze before a quick decision was made impacting their campuses.

Due to a revolutionary change, the COVID-19 crisis forced institutions to move to a robust distance learning program. Administrators and faculty had to move quickly to augment their approach to education during the COVID-19 pandemic beginning in March 2020 in the United States. The Spring 2020 semester had to be immediately augmented, along with the Summer 2020 semester. In the Fall 2020 semester, institutions had a little time to plan the next steps for accommodating the revolutionary change that took place in the previous semester. Ultimately, distance learning through available delivery platforms (e.g., Zoom, Adobe Connect) became essential in Christian higher education.

This revolutionary change caused many institutions to rethink the theory and practice of Christian education with COVID-19, potentially ushering in a “digital age” in education. Wissema (2009) explained the history of higher education into three categories: the medieval university, the research university, and the technology and science university. Strielkowski (2020) suggested a fourth category: the digital university. Seke (2020) described time in educational history as a digital educational revolution. In response to COVID-19, CHEIs had to transition traditional teaching and learning methods to distance learning methods. Traditional, face-to-face educational delivery and learning had to be adjusted to a digital format due to social distancing mandates. Teachers had to adjust to online delivery, projects, and video lectures. Administrators had to balance “stability and agility” creating “stagility” (Spurling, 2020, p. 6) in their action plans at CHEIs.

### **Background**

The global pandemic resulting from COVID-19 created a crisis in the world that impacted every industry, people group, and way of life. In March 2020, the crisis had an impact on education at every level: K-12, college, and graduate schools. Literature concerning COVID-19 and education is beginning to move across the databases, research projects, and articles; however, literature on the impact of COVID-19 on Christian higher education is lacking.

The entire world of education scrambled to teach, learn, and adjust to a makeshift distance learning platform to finish out the semester. Various schools had to modify onsite teaching and learning in response to the COVID-19 crisis (Schaffhauser, 2020). In elementary schools, children and parents had to learn how to navigate distance learning. Video conferencing became the new norm. In high schools, proms were cancelled, and commencement exercises were moved to drive-through celebrations or online video celebrations. In colleges and

universities, students had to abandon dorm rooms, faculty members had to adapt to distance learning, and students had to finish the semester off campus without a community of learning. In graduate schools, students had to now balance the lack of work, online learning, and family needs on all levels.

Christian higher education institutions and administrators experienced a disruption because of the crisis of COVID-19. This crisis would have an impact on community life at the Christian institution. Part of the philosophy behind a CHEI is discipleship and Christian spiritual formation that occurs within a community setting. COVID-19 caused campuses to abandon the traditional community discipleship process and replace it with a digital discipleship process.

To understand a sustainable model of leadership and the main challenges leaders faced in higher education institutions (HEI), Filho et al. (2020) conducted an explorative survey of higher education leaders in over 29 countries. The top-management representatives who participated in the Inter-University Sustainable Development Research Program (IUSDRP) were included in the sample. Three sections made up the survey questionnaire: background, work as a leader, and desired aspects. Vissor and Courtice's (2011) work *Sustainability Leadership: Linking Theory and Practice* influenced the creation of the survey. Fifty responses to the survey were received, and simple descriptive statistics were used to analyze the results.

Filho et al.'s (2020) study on sustainability and leadership in higher education institutions reported 46% of participants surveyed had served in their respective leadership positions for over six years. When surveyed, 76% of leaders responded that an "inclusive" (p. 8) style represented their leadership style. The primary trait of those surveyed (64%) was being a "systemic/holistic thinker" (p. 8). In the area of leadership skills, 60% of leaders surveyed agreed that being able to

handle challenges and innovation was important. Finally, in the area of knowledge, 68% of those surveyed believed “interdisciplinary connectedness” (p. 8) was of primary importance.

As this survey was applied to higher education institutions, 78% of those surveyed indicated that curriculum and investing in education for sustainability should be implemented as a result to this study. The lack of funding was noted by 80% of responses as a primary concern and difficulty for implementing sustainability in higher education institutions. This study was exploratory in design but provided some insight into the desire of academic leaders for more sustainable leadership in higher education institutions (Filho et al., 2020).

COVID-19 brought challenges to the entrepreneurial university. To understand those challenges, Kawamorita et al. (2020) conducted a qualitative study with 25 experts from different Middle Eastern countries. The data indicated entrepreneurial universities wrestled with both internal and external challenges. This study used an interpretive approach, as the data was gathered through purposive sampling. Participants were selected for this study by the following criteria:

- Experts that had experience in a university setting.
- Experts that had published at least 5 publications about Quintuple Helix.
- Experts that had a well-known reputation in their selected country in

entrepreneurship.

- Experts that had been involved in entrepreneurship policymaking in their country

(p.81).

After five 3-hour video-conferencing focus groups, the data were coded and verified by the participants. All participants of this study had a terminal degree and 76% of participants were male. Over 84% of participants had over 20 years of experience in their field of study. The

findings of this study were organized in three categories: general issues, challenges, and solutions (Kawamorita et al.,2020)).

The goal of this study was to initiate activities and plans that would assist entrepreneurial universities in handling future pandemics. This study described challenges that entrepreneurial universities faced. The researchers also suggested potential solutions (Kawamorita et al. (2020).

To assess the value of online teaching during a pandemic, Desai et al. (2020) conducted an online survey within the medical community of India. Specifically, medical students and medical education had to adapt to an online educational design. After ethical clearance, an online survey was conducted with many medical schools and professionals at the undergraduate, graduate, postgraduate, and teaching levels. A snowball sampling of 412 persons was collected from a 16-question survey. To assess the inferential statistics, a chi-squared test was used.

The results of Desai et al.'s (2020) study indicated that online classes were viewed favorably by the majority of those who participated. Using a Likert scale, the study found that 79.9% of those surveyed were actively engaged in attending classes, and 42% struggled with attending classes with work duties at the same time. Also, 35% of undergraduate participants struggled with the online class content. The problem of poor internet connection was identified as the main hindrance in attending classes online. Overall, 69.2% of participants believed that online classes were both satisfying and an economically appropriate delivery method.

Desai et al.'s (2020) study concluded that poor internet connections in a developing country are still a hindrance for online classes in medical education in India. For online classes to be implemented into the medical education system, Desai et al. recommended a gradual technology approach to avoid "technology shock" (p. 2403). Desai et al. also recommended a

bigger sampling size and proposed a mixed methods approach of blending traditional and online classes in medical education curriculum.

Ana et al. (2020) studied students' perception of e-learning during the COVID-19 pandemic in the countries of Indonesia and Malaysia. The purpose of this study was to survey and describe student knowledge of e-learning and to evaluate their e-learning experience. One hundred thirty-six participants responded to the Likert scale survey. The demographic breakdown for this study was 79% women and 21% men (p. 17). The age of most of the participants was between 17 and 22 years of age (88%).

This study reported that 46% of respondents understood e-learning to be "long distance learning with using technology" (Ana et al.,2020, p. 18). The majority of participants 46.6% in this study reported Google Classroom was the type of e-learning platform preferred. Fifty- one percent of students believed that they were prepared for an e-learning platform. The data revealed 57% of students believed that e-learning provided "a lot of new experiences for them" (p. 21). Based on responses from participants, e-learning was evaluated and found to be a "neutral" (p. 23) learning approach with both advantages and disadvantages. Overall, this study revealed that there was both ease and difficulty in working with an e-learning platform.

To describe research activities at higher education institutions during a pandemic, Verbystska and Syzonenko (2020) studied both challenges and solutions researchers faced during COVID-19. Four scientific teams at selected higher education institutions participated in the focus-group study of 40 researchers. The participants were selected among the partners of Chernihiv Polytechnic National University in Ukraine. This research took place during the quarantine period of March to May 2020. A five-question questionnaire via Zoom was used in an online focus group (Verbystska and Syzonenko, 2020).

This study explained that research projects within the higher education institution community adjusted to more online conferencing during the COVID-19 pandemic. Out of the focus group, seven participants were involved with projects in the preparation phase, 10 participants were involved with first-year projects, 13 participants were involved in the middle of implementation phase, and 10 participants were involved with the finishing phase of research projects. Overall, from the focus group, the majority of research activities were moved to distance conferences or virtual formats. Of the participants, 55% needed equipment found onsite at the higher education institution to use for their projects, and 47.5% of participants mentioned they had to delay research equipment purchases during this time of the pandemic (Verbystka and Syzonenko, 2020).

Verbystka and Syzonenko's (2020) research shared that face-o-face activities were replaced with online or virtual activities at many higher education institutions as a direct result from the COVID-19 pandemic. Research activities were limited, and access to laboratories at the higher education institution level was limited at times to only one participant at a time. Research equipment access and usage were limited during the quarantined period. Verbystka and Syzonenko found it difficult to apply a common procedure during a pandemic to allow for research activities to continue without disruption.

To describe the experiences of college students in South Korea during COVID-19 with emergency remote teaching, Shim and Lee (2020) studied thematic similarities as found through qualitative research. At a South Korean university, 894 college students who were taking an online class were selected for this study that involved a questionnaire concerning satisfaction with emergency remote teaching. The data was collected over 4 days after students had already been in emergency remote classes for four weeks. This study received 393 student (170 male and

223 female) responses that were collected and analyzed. This study noted a significant limitation was that participants were only involved with four weeks of remote classes. Overall, this study produced valuable data that indicated students' perception of emergency remote teaching.

The survey that was used involved three choices concerning remote learning: satisfied, dissatisfied, and improvement. The primary selections of the participants in all three areas were:

- 27% of participants were satisfied with a comfortable educational environment.
- 34.14% of participants were dissatisfied with network instability.
- 43.31% of participants felt that network stabilization needed to be improved.

The results of this study indicated that 87.2% of participants identified their homes as the primary place to participate in remote classes. Also, 69.82% of responses identified laptops as the primary tool that used for remote classes (Shim & Lee, 2020).

To understand the impact of COVID-19 on educational delivery methods, Mladenova et al. (2020) compared e-learning (synchronous, asynchronous, and hybrid) among faculty and students to traditional onsite learning before and after the outbreak of COVID-19. Mladenova et al. surveyed students in January 2020 before the pandemic and after May 2020. The first survey evaluated the students' attitude toward delivery methods, and the second survey evaluated the students' life experiences since the pandemic prompted most schools to deliver education through distance learning methods.

In the first survey, 201 students participated; 80% of participants were male and 20% of participants were female. The second survey involved 109 participants with very similar gender breakdown. This study revealed that the majority of higher education students would attend classes regardless of the delivery format. Asynchronous delivery methods were selected on 12.8 % of the students' responses, and 68.8% selected synchronous delivery methods. Overall,

60.6% of students believed synchronous learning helped them understand the teaching material. However, 42.2% of students surveyed believe that e-learning is more stressful than traditional onsite learning (Mladenova et al., 2020).

This study reported that e-learning was the best flexible option during a medical pandemic. Mladenova et al. (2020) recommended shorter screen-time activities, appropriate online security for users, and time to adapt to a new learning platform. Finally, the researchers suggested for most universities, COVID-19 was a test of the online delivery methods already in place, but for others COVID-19 was a “large-scale digital transformation” (p.1169).

To analyze the effects of confinement on students brought on by COVID-19, Gonzalez et al. (2020) studied 458 students from a university in Spain. Two groups were analyzed: Group 1 (control) were students from the academic years of 2017-2018 and 2018-2019, and Group 2 (experimental) were students from the academic year of 2019-2020. Students’ performance was analyzed before, during, and after confinement by using computer adaptive testing (CAT). This comparison quantitative research was set up with accurate measurements of autonomous learning activities with the control group and the experimental group. Student performances in three courses (applied computing, metabolism, and design of water treatment facilities) were used to gather data for this study.

The results of this study revealed that confinement had a positive effect on students’ performance. In the applied computer course, statistical significance was noted comparing class scores during 2017-2019 to the class scores during 2019-2020. In the metabolism course, no additional activities were selected over the 3 years; however, face-to-face learning was replaced with online learning. Students’ scores increased positively after confinement from the previous years (Gonzalez et al., 2020).

This study found that students did perform better through confinement related to COVID-19. The reasons for this phenomenon are discussed in the study and could be related to three things from the Gonzales et al. (2020) perspective: the students fear of missing the year of classes, the students were more self-motivated, and the students were spending more engaging time online in classes. According to Gonzales et al., students' learning performances improved due to confinement.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The revolutionary change theory is the framework for this study. Revolutionary change theory (RCT) provides the idea and concept that change is dramatic and forced upon individuals, companies, and schools. (RCT) is a theory that implements change from the top down. Burke (2018) defined revolutionary change as a “jolt” (p. 99) to a system. Revolutionary change does not occur in a straight-line pattern or slowly over a period of time; it usually is caused by a disruption (Burke, 2018). This theoretical framework provides the best framework to understand the educational mandates that were handed down by the president, government, governors, and the Center of Disease Control (CDC) that directly impacted educational institutions in response to COVID-19.

Organizations process change gradually over time in a natural life cycle; however, at times organizations have abrupt changes due to crisis. The crisis of COVID-19 disrupted or jolted the world. The impact of that disruption caused every business, school, and person to adjust quickly to changes. For Burke (2018), an organization has a fundamental mission of survival. The world went into survival mode. Education went into survival mode. To survive, CHEIs had to transition to online distance learning quickly, utilizing information technology and class delivery for a student-centered experience in the midst of a pandemic.

There was no time to cautiously make decisions over a long period of time. Schools in the month of March 2020 extended spring breaks to modify delivery modes, make necessary precautions to campuses, inform stakeholders of changes, and comply with the recommendations from the CDC. Revolutionary change had occurred in the world of education due to the COVID-19 crisis.

How does a revolutionary change theoretical framework impact this study? Most of the literature on higher education and crises does not involve a widespread crisis that impacted every level of education at the same time. The crisis of COVID-19 impacted every educational institution. The data and literature on crisis in higher education pre-COVID-19 has individual schools going through crises; however, these crises do not compare to the crises of a global pandemic. The literature on crisis in higher education pre-COVID-19 discusses individual strategies on how to handle crises; however, some of these strategies do not fit a global pandemic. Revolutionary change theory gives a framework to understand the pre-COVID and mid-COVID crisis that are impacting education.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the lived experience of administrators at a Christian higher education institution during the COVID-19 crisis. For the purposes of this study, the COVID-19 crisis was defined as the highly contagious virus known as the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) that was declared a global pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) in March 2020 (Mayo Clinic, 2021).

### **Significance of the Study**

This study is significant to Christian higher education and administrators as they plan, lead, and guide their institutions into a future of innovation, change, and adjustment post-

COVID-19. The crisis of COVID-19 impacted education, and that type of widespread crisis needs more documented research to provide preparedness as CHEIs move into a future of a post-crisis era. Administrators want to lead their institutions with the best decisions; this study desires to document data that will help in the decision making and planning process. The documentation of these lived experiences by CHEIs' administrators may provide preparedness for future crises.

### **Overview of Methodology**

A phenomenological study approach to qualitative research has been selected for this study. For phenomenological qualitative research, interviewing multiple individuals that have experienced the same phenomenon is vital to explaining and describing the shared phenomenon (Creswell and Poth, 2018). The phenomenological approach is appropriate because it includes the description and interpretation of the lived experiences of a common phenomenon. In this research, administrators of a Christian higher education institution participated in interviews to share their experiences leading through the Covid-19 crisis. According to Creswell and Poth, the phenomenological research design describes and allows for an interpretive process of researcher and interviewing those who have lived through a shared experience. Therefore, a part of the methodology will involve the researcher bracketing one's own personal experiences to gain a new perspective on the lived phenomenon. Behind the methodology of using phenomenology, an interpretive framework of social constructivism guided the research as administrators dealt with COVID-19 on a particular campus context.

### **Research Design**

The research design for this phenomenological study involved conducting interviews and documenting the shared experiences of Christian higher education administrators who were impacted by COVID-19. As COVID-19 (what) impacted each administrator, reality was

constructed through that lived experience (how). These experiences were documented, analyzed, and synthesized to bring understanding to the lived phenomenon of these administrators. Data were organized by an inductive method based on commonality and consensus among participants through a systematic approach emphasized by Moustakas (1994), which involved statements, meaning, and theme clustering to give an overall description of the essence of the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Moustakas explained the researcher then develops a textual description of the participants' experiences, as well as a structural description of how the participants experienced the lived phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To develop the textual and structural descriptions for this research interviews with administrators generating themes for analysis led to the development and documentation of the essence of the lived phenomenon.

### **Research Question**

The research question that guided this study was:

1. What were the lived experiences for administrators of a Christian higher education institution while leading through the COVID-19 crisis?

### **Data Collection**

Using purposeful sampling, data were collected from participants that were Christian higher education institution administrators from an accredited Christian higher education institution. Participants were asked to participate in Zoom interviews using an interview guide. Permission to conduct the interviews was granted from Southeastern University's IRB. In addition, all participants signed an informed consent (see Appendix B). The data were recorded electronically via Zoom, transcribed via Otter.ai, and emailed to participants for verification and accuracy. Names were changed to protect the individuals and the institution.

This data collection process was recorded appropriately in a codebook and safely stored in a password protected digital format on a password protected computer.

### **Procedures**

Open-ended questions were introduced to Christian higher education administrators who experienced the phenomenon of leading through Covid-19 (See Appendix A). After the interviews were completed, the transcripts were sent to each participant for validation. After all transcriptions were verified for accuracy, data were analyzed using the coding process. The coding process started with reading through the recorded transcripts multiple times to gain an overall understanding of the shared experiences and phenomenon. Next, phrases and statements were organized into common themes found in each transcribed interview. The themes found in each transcribed interview were organized into more common specific themes by clustering. Then, the specific themes were organized into main themes to describe the phenomenon experienced. Finally, a written report was shared with participants, based on understanding, analyzing, and synthesizing the data for validation.

### **Limitations**

The participants of this study were limited to the administrative cabinet of one Christian higher education institution. This primary limitation may not reflect the general population of leadership in other Christian higher education institutions. Another limitation was the research time frame. For this study, the time frame was from the official announcement of national shutdown orders related to COVID-19 in March 2020 through one year after that official shutdown; in terms of educational semesters from Spring 2020 semester through Spring 2021 semester. The lived experiences of these administrators and this research is limited to year one of the pandemic.

## Definition of Key Terms

The following words and phrases are key terms for the study.

- **crisis:** A crisis can be defined as an event or situation that represents a risk to the life of an institution that requires immediate attention of institutional leaders (Gigliotti, 2020).
- **Revolutionary Change Theory:** Revolutionary change theory can be defined as a theory of change impacting an organization by a “jolt” to the system (Burke, 2018).
- **Christian higher education institution (CHEI):** A Christian higher education institution (CHEI) is defined as a college or university that is committed to integrating biblical truth into academic enterprise that is committed to the moral and spiritual development of students, and that is committed to graduating students with the desire to redeem the world (CCCU, 2018).
- **traditional learning:** Learning that is delivered through a traditional on-campus residential model (Dreamson, 2020).
- **online distance learning:** Learning that is delivered through an online learning platform (Dreamson, 2020).
- **e-learning:** E-learning or virtual learning is an alternative learning model that allows for teaching and learning to occur outside of the traditional learning model with face-to-face interaction between teacher and student through an online platform that allows for video conferencing (Ana et al., 2020).
- **COVID-19 (Coronavirus):** COVID-19 is the highly contagious virus known as the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) that was declared a world pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) in March 2020 (Mayo Clinic, 2021).

- **pandemic:** Pandemics are diseases that occur from time to time throughout human history that negatively affect humanity physically, sociologically, economically, and psychologically (Akat & Karatas, 2020).
- **stagility:** The combination of “stability” and “agility” that lends itself to being committed to innovation and adaptiveness in a cultural mindset (Spurling, 2020).

### **Summary**

Christian higher education administrators had to act quickly to navigate sustainability in response to the COVID-19. The disruption caused by COVID-19 made administrators, faculty, and students come together to find solutions to continue education. The COVID-19 crisis made the online learning model the primary focus as an educational operational response to the pandemic. Administrators had to adjust to the revolutionary changes handed to them quickly, efficiently, and with institutional sustainability as a goal. The responses and experiences by these administrators may assist other CHEIs in navigating future crises and pandemics.

## II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the lived experience of administrators at a Christian higher education institution during the COVID-19 crisis. For the purposes of this study, the COVID-19 crisis was defined as the highly contagious virus known as the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) that was declared a world pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) in March 2020 (Mayo Clinic, 2021).

A review of recent publications of education and the COVID-19 crisis indicated administrators and stakeholders of higher education institutions attempted to respond in a sensible, flexible, and stabilizing manner in dealing with the effect of COVID-19. The global COVID-19 pandemic created a crisis in the world that impacted higher education.

### **Crises and University Leadership**

Gigliotti (2016) conducted qualitative research with college and university presidents through interviews on the topic of crisis and higher education leader experiences. Using snowball sampling, Gigliotti recruited seven presidents to participate in the study. The participants represented American public and private institutions of higher education. Each interview conducted was recorded, transcribed, and reviewed for accuracy. Common themes were coded, and key words were identified for this grounded theory approach to qualitative research. According to Gigliotti, the qualitative interview process allowed the presidents in the study to share deeply their lived experiences with crises. Gigliotti revealed that the participants who were

interviewed recognized a crisis as a disrupter of normal operations and was a challenge for the institution and leader to handle. The following leadership themes from participant interviews were:

- President as comforter.
- President as caretaker.
- President as institutional voice.
- President as “man of steel” (pp. 191-193).

Overall, the rationale for Gigliotti’s research was to gain perspective on past crises in higher education to guide and prepare for future responses to crisis by college and/or university presidents. Gigliotti noted the limitations of the study were the small number of participants, as well as the selected methodology which gave more room for researcher error. Gigliotti’s research described the overarching goal of higher education leaders is to remain calm, provide clear direction, and engage others confidently in responding to a crisis.

In a similar study, Holzweiss and Walker (2018) researched the need for higher education administrators to be trained in crisis management. The purpose of this study was to identify what the key factors were that new administrators needed to know about crises. For Holzweiss and Walker, crises were organized into three levels: “disasters, crises, and critical incidents” (p. 126).

Holzweiss and Walker (2018) created a qualitative study that involved an open-ended survey that included 14 questions, with the primary focus on a crisis experience that needed to be addressed when training a new administrator. A random sampling of participants from the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA): Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education received the survey. Of the 1500 people targeted, 227 responded, resulting in a response rate of 18%. Participants shared the functional areas of

administration positions that they held. The researchers coded the survey response results over a 4-month period to organize themes and categories. The open-ended survey question model was found to be helpful for this large study; however, limitations involved participant follow-up and a thorough contextual understanding of each administrator's position. The data were analyzed through a process that involved an intercoder agreement, continually maintaining an audit trail, and processing results with triangulation. The researchers met several times over a 4-month period to categorize phrases and identify patterns in agreement. A paper trail or documented audit of ideas and processes was used to make observations throughout the analysis of data. The researchers used Zdziarski's (2006) work on crisis management to assist in establishing reliability and validity.

The results of this study were organized into five important themes for new administrators to understand when handling crises:

- Managing the logistics of a crisis.
- Mental and physical health of students.
- Criminal and violent behavior on campus.
- Procedures, processes, and resources.
- Incidents involving the work environment (Holzweiss & Walker, 2018, p. 129).

The researchers organized the five categories into two important sections with types of crises events and crisis training needs. This study described types of crises that involve individual behavior, incidents on university trips, and institutional problems with funding or facilities. The study pointed to the need to have a better understanding and working definition of "crisis" so that new administrators could understand the levels of crises. This research reported 75% of respondents needed a practical guide on how to respond to a crisis.

Overall, Holzweiss and Walker's (2018) work provided a window into the literature that was being written pre-COVID-19 concerning crises and crisis events in higher education.

Researchers are grappling with concerns of process and policy in handling major crisis events on university campuses. A definition of "crisis" remained ambiguous among the participants of this study.

In times of crisis, leadership decision making is of primary importance, according to Oroszi (2018); however, most leaders are inexperienced in crises. In a study conducted by Oroszi, the decision-making processes from global, national, and local expert crisis leaders were examined to identify common traits and to construct a new model to guide leaders that experience crisis. For the Oroszi study, a crisis leader was defined and selected as one who held a high-level decision-making position within their organization. An expert for this research was defined as one who had more than 10 years' experience in their respected fields.

The study included a non-experimental relational design to examine patterns from crisis leaders using a decision-making survey instrument. The study was preliminary research to address the hypothesis that current decision-making models are inadequate and do not capture the process and traits crisis leaders are using. The study involved two consensus models using Delphi questionnaire and nominal group, which is used to gather qualitative data from a targeted expert group (Oroszi, 2020). Survey data were analyzed with Qualtrics and SPSS. Twenty crisis experts were selected through purposive sampling, and a 75% response rate was given to leave 15 participants in the study. An emailed survey was used that included over 50 process traits from seven decision-making models. Each member was called by phone to offer any clarification to the survey, and data were collected electronically. The analysis of survey data revealed 13 common traits among decision-making expert crisis leaders in the field (Oroszi, 2018):

1. Multiple people involved
2. Conditions continue to change
3. Assumes objective data
4. More than one response/choice/option
5. Organizational goals exist
6. Rank ordering or rating procedure results
7. Structure of organization influences outcome
8. Time constraints
9. All options are assigned a number based on value
10. Conversation and debate
11. Decision makers are experienced (p. 345)
12. Focus on more than one issue at a time
13. Outcome decision based on plot

The research narrowed 50 traits to the 13 common traits from the survey data by using Qualtrics and identifying frequency of trait usage of 80% or more by participants. Trait usage by participants of less than 80% were eliminated. Overall survey results were analyzed by using descriptive statistics, choice elimination framework, and Principal Component Analysis (PCA), a technique that reduces and identifies correlating information. Both frequencies and percentages were used to analyze survey results. Due to the low sample size of 15 participants, further data analysis was conducted using a bivariate correlation test that identified relationships with the crisis leaders and the 50 traits. Also, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy was conducted to review data for factor analysis. A value of 0.5 is minimum and this research was a 0.685, giving an appropriate value. Finally, a Bartlett test of sphericity was

conducted providing a minimum standard for conducting factor analysis and significance was  $<0.005$ , indicating a  $p$ -value  $<0.01$ . The survey results would be used to answer the hypothesis that a new model of decision-making should be used based on the common 13 traits of this study. Oroszi (2018) examined the 13 traits and summarized them into three categories that could be used in building a new model of decision-making for crisis leaders. 1) A leader must be aware of the full context of the crisis involving time, conditions, changes, and organizational goals. 2) Group dynamics are important to crisis leaders, and the involvement of other experienced teammates can be helpful. 3) Experts shared that decision-making actions should have more than one choice or response and should include a system to ranking responses to crises based on levels of value.

### **Impact of COVID-19 and Abrupt Adjustments to Delivery Methods**

In a recent study conducted by Gonzalez-Ramirez et al. (2021), students faced delivery method changes in response to COVID-19. In this study, researchers measured the changes brought on by COVID-19 with students who transitioned from face-to-face learning to an online learning model. From the perspective of Gonzalez-Ramirez et al., students faced abrupt changes in response to COVID-19 dealing with learning. A switch occurred from face-to-face delivery to an online delivery method that had impact on student life.

Researchers collected data at the end of the spring 2020 semester through a survey with undergraduate students who were enrolled in seven courses at a small inner-city college. The survey was designed in Qualtrics and distributed to 294 students using a Moodle platform. At the end of the spring semester, the survey was distributed, and students were invited to participate after IRB approval was granted. The response rate was 47% or 139 students responded out of 294. After the responses were reviewed, the number of completed surveys became 121. The

survey had three sections of questions. First, students were asked to complete the higher education adaptive version of the Maslach Burnout Inventory-General Survey (MBI-GS). The purpose was to measure student level of exhaustion as a factor in dealing with COVID-19. Second, college students were asked a series of questions concerning the abrupt adjustments to remote learning from face-to-face learning. Finally, student demographic data were collected through the survey. The results were organized into two sections: dealing with student burnout and experiences in response to COVID-19 and switching to online learning (Gonzalez-Ramirez et al., 2021).

In analyzing the data, Gonzalez-Ramirez et al. (2021) organized the first section of research questions and responses into categories of exhaustion, cynicism, and professional efficacy on the scale of 0 (*never*) to 6 (*everyday*). In the area of burnout, Gonzalez-Ramirez et al. reported that the average score of exhaustion was 3.15 and 2.5 for cynicism, with a higher score meaning more burnout. In the area of professional efficacy, Gonzalez-Ramirez et al. reported an average response score of 4.70; in this section, a lower score would mean more burnout. Gonzalez-Ramirez et al. implemented *t*-tests with other studies for comparisons with the sample averages in the three areas. Overall, the *t*-tests comparing data results with four other studies revealed that participants in the Gonzalez-Ramirez et al. study experienced more exhaustion, cynicism, and professional efficiency during COVID-19 when compared to the other studies. The data of the study revealed first-time college students experienced higher levels of exhaustion and cynicism than second- or third-year students. Also, the data reported that female students experienced less cynicism than male students.

COVID-19 caused colleges to move abruptly to a remote learning model according to Gonzalez-Ramirez et al. (2021). As a result, students' experienced changes connected to

learning, focus and motivation, and community life. Gonzalez-Ramirez et al., using a percentage conversion scale of 1 to 5 in the last section of the survey comparing face-to-face learning to remote learning, reported a 4.49 for face-to-face learning satisfaction and a 2.20 for remote learning satisfaction. The averages were statistically significant and provided a result that students in the study preferred face-to-face learning over remote learning.

Gonzalez-Ramirez et al. (2021) asked students to share the difficulties faced during the remote learning experience. Sixty percent of students had difficulty with internet, 43% had trouble with video conferencing software, 71% had trouble finding a quiet study place, 45% had financial trouble, and 36% had computer hardware problems during COVID-19 in the spring 2020 semester. In this survey, social and community connectedness decreased in the following areas according to respondents:

1. 87% agreed that student connectedness to peers decreased.
2. 64% agreed that student connectedness to faculty decreased.
3. 89% agreed that student connectedness to the college community decreased.

Another concern that the survey reported was that 81% of students surveyed agreed that motivation decreased. Students had a difficult time maintaining a healthy balance of physical and mental exercise according to Gonzalez-Ramirez et al. (2021). The survey documented a 55% decrease in exercise time versus only a 26% increase. In the area of healthy eating habits, 41% of those surveyed decreased in healthy eating.

From the data, Gonzalez-Ramirez et al. (2021) explained that, as a result of COVID-19, students experienced more social, mental, and physical changes, as well as academic changes. As this study documented the changes students experienced due to pivoting from face-to-face learning to remote learning, implications for students, faculty, and administrators need to be

discussed. From the research, the authors recommended institutions and stakeholders to seriously consider ways in which to lower stress, particularly regarding exhaustion and cynicism with online learning. Regarding student perception and online learning, Gonzalez-Ramirez et al.'s research highlighted strengths and weaknesses associated with remote learning. Gonzalez-Ramirez et al. explained that COVID-19 disrupted a “familiar atmosphere” (p. 40) among college students and created a gap with students learning in a new environment and having to deal with technology, instead of face-to-face learning and face-to-face relationships. Content and a new learning platform were experienced simultaneously due to the pandemic. Along with technology concerns, students continued to have home learning concerns. Not every student, according to Gonzalez-Ramirez et al., will be able to study and engage classes in a stable, distraction-free home environment.

Gonzalez-Ramirez et al. (2021) provided data documenting the experiences of college students during the COVID-19 pandemic. It was reported that students experienced disruption beyond just the classroom experience. Student life was impacted negatively. Overall, students preferred face-to-face learning above online learning, as experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. Gonzalez-Ramirez et al. recommended investigating the same group of participants in a future study to develop causal relations.

Emergency remote learning (ERL) was the primary learning method as a response to COVID-19 according to Ho et al. (2021). To limit the spread of COVID-19, ERL was used at most universities in the world to help prevent the spread of the virus. Administrators replaced most face-to-face learning with ERL and worked with faculty to shift toward online learning extensively during the pandemic.

In the spring 2020 semester, higher education institutions modified delivery methods of traditional classroom learning to ERL to provide a stopgap measure for students to continue classes in the midst of a pandemic. Quality of learning, effectiveness, and learning outcomes continued to be adjusted as the delivery methods adjusted to ERL. Online learning and delivery methods, both asynchronous and synchronous in a non-pandemic environment, should not be considered the same as ERL. Instead, ERL is meant to provide a temporary, fast, teaching option to avoid disruption of classroom learning. Online learning typically has a methodical approach, while ERL involves more of a reactionary approach to teaching and learning. After reviewing many studies on online learning, especially in an e-learning framework, Ho et al. (2021) attempted to explain student satisfaction with ERL during COVID-19. The E-learning system success (EESS) model proposed that student satisfaction is a key indicator of EESS success. The researchers found that studying student satisfaction as a whole in an asynchronous, e-synchronous, and synchronous learning environment influenced the research on the ERL level.

Ho et al. (2021) explained that student satisfaction with the use of ERL in higher education needed to be measured. In a quantitative research study, 425 undergraduate students in a self-funded university in Hong Kong, who were using an online ERL platform, were surveyed for this study. The survey was distributed to over 3,219 registered students through the period of April 29 through June 10, 2020. The survey used 27 items from “six constructs, including 1) readiness; 2) accessibility; 3) instructor related; 4) assessment-related; 5) learning-related and; 6) self-concern and the dependent variable satisfaction of online learning” (p. 9).

After all data were analyzed and processed, 51.3% of respondents were female and 48.7% were male. Approximately 41% of respondents were in year three of the study. Student respondents rated themselves with 6.36 out of 10 for understanding digital knowledge. The

results of this study reported a 4.11 out of 7.0 satisfaction with ERL, on a Likert scale. Multiple regression and machine learning models were used to compare before and after results of the survey to maximize reliability and accuracy.

In spite of the widespread use of online learning, the face-to-face learning model was preferred by the majority of participants. Ho et al. (2021) concluded COVID-19 provided stakeholders the opportunity to see ERL in action. Students may adjust to ERL; however, students prefer person-to-person interaction.

Education during COVID-19 shifted to emergency remote delivery, according to Balakrishnan (2020). In a qualitative study exploring the educational responses to COVID-19 in the countries of Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand, Balakrishnan used a document analysis technique to build a simple case study for each country. To provide data for the document analysis, social media platforms for each country's department of education were searched for items relating to COVID-19 education management, and one English-based online newspaper from each country was reviewed for educational responses. Data were coded and analyzed during the lockdown period of March 2020 to July 2020.

In Malaysia, data revealed 80% of the country had internet access; however, 40% of students did not have a device to engage learning. In Singapore, over 1,200 routers and over 20,000 laptops were given to students to provide for home-based learning (HBL). In Indonesia, rural students lacked proper internet connectivity due to the country being geographically made up of over 17,000 islands (Balakrishnan, 2020). Thailand struggled to provide online learning, while attempting to bring normalcy to schools and universities. Teachers in Thailand were encouraged to interact with students any way possible. Overall, all four countries experienced disadvantages in education for the impoverished student.

The results of the Balakrishnan (2020) study revealed that online learning during COVID-19 turned into crisis teaching, and educational systems were not particularly prepared for the shift. Students in communities that were on the fringes of society were at a disadvantage due to lack of technology. Lack of infrastructure in the countries impacted educational delivery, therefore, the lack of delivery created a learning loss, as students struggled to have access to classes both in-person and online due to COVID-19. Balakrishnan concluded by making three observations from the document analysis: communities on the fringes were impacted negatively in terms of education, poor infrastructure and lack of device access limited online learning and teaching, and to assist the learning crisis, a private-public partnerships should be implemented locally to address academic needs.

COVID-19 brought changes to teaching in higher education. People around the world were instructed to avoid large gatherings, keep socially distant, and remain at home, if possible. In the world of education, institutions were asked to migrate face-to-face classes to online delivery. Thus, virtual learning and online delivery methods became part of the solution for class continuation during the pandemic. According to Zheng et al. (2020), online digital learning for most of the world remains problematic due to poor internet, infrastructure, and resources. Literature reviews and research are ongoing in these subject areas; therefore, Zheng et al. researched the impact of COVID-19 and how students responded in an online community with proactive personalities and social capital. The researchers believed that, in extremely challenging situations, proactive personalities handle stress better than those that do not possess those traits. The study conducted by Zheng et al. explored influences on students' personalities and social networking interactions in an online format. The social capital theory was used as a theory

behind this study to measure student-teacher interaction. Students were capable of using the internet and developing relationships through digital platforms.

The pandemic caused higher education institutions to embrace online learning much more than traditional learning, making quality of online interaction among students and faculty a major focus of this digital education period. Zheng et al. (2020) hypothesized the following concerning this research:

1. Proactive personality increases internet self-efficacy.
2. Proactive personality increases online interaction quality.
3. Internet self-efficacy mediates the association between proactive personality and social capital.
4. Online interaction quality mediates the association between proactive personality and social capital.
5. Perceived social support moderates the association between proactive personality and internet self-efficacy in this way that this association becomes stronger by increasing perceived social support and vice versa.
6. Perceived social support moderates the association between proactive personality and online interaction quality in this way that this association becomes stronger by increasing perceived social support and vice versa.
7. Perceived social support moderates the mediating effect of internet self-efficacy in the association between proactive personality and social capital in this way that this mediating effect becomes stronger by increasing perceived social support and vice versa.

8. Perceived social support moderates the mediating effect of online interaction quality in the association between proactive personality and social capital in this way that this mediating effect becomes stronger by increasing perceived social support and vice versa (pp. 2-3).

To collect data for this research, Zheng et al. (2020) sampled both graduate and undergraduate students from six universities in Islamabad, Pakistan between April 2020 to July 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic. An online survey tool was created through Google Docs and distributed among university students who had been placed in an informal classroom social media group to assist in class updates and participation during the pandemic. With permission from the administration, the survey questionnaire was sent to students through recruited student volunteers. A 5-point Likert scale implemented on the survey. This particular study used a data collection process known as the time lag approach that required two separate data collecting periods two months apart. The first data collected were from 372 responses out of 510 surveys sent, and the second data collection received 332 responses. The response rate was noted as 65%. The majority of responses (67%) came from women, and the majority age group (37.5%) were between the ages of 21-25.

Zheng et al. (2020) analyzed the data and formulated hypotheses. For hypotheses 1-4, hierarchical multiple regression was used, and for hypotheses 5-8, hierarchical moderation regression was used. Proactive personality was the independent variable which was made standard, and social capital was made a dependent variable. This study tested eight hypotheses to examine student proactive personality and internet-based social capital. The results of this testing reported findings that three hypotheses were not supported: H3, H5, and H7. However, five hypotheses were supported.

Overall, Zheng et al. (2020) found the quality of online interaction and self-efficacy would increase among students who had a more proactive personality. Also, students' proactive personality and social capital were connected to online interaction quality. These results explain that digital interaction online between students and teachers is greatly impacted by students' proactive personality and social capital. Also, due to COVID-19 restrictions, students had to use online interactions to enhance their academic and social network; therefore, a student's education quality can either increase or decrease depending on that social network. The influence and support of family, friends, and faculty—online and in person—greatly impacts student digital learning.

### **Impact of COVID-19 and Abrupt Adjustments for Faculty and Students**

According to Cutri and Mena (2020), since COVID-19, faculty readiness for online teaching has been accelerated due to the pandemic. In December of 2019, Cutri and Mena explained the need to be prepared as faculty for increased online delivery of education. However, some faculty were well prepared, and others were not ready.

In this study, Cutri and Mena (2020) critically examined faculty readiness and experiences with online education. The research question of Cutri and Mena's study was "What are the variables and overarching themes that arise in research literature specifically focused on non-expert faculty transitioning, developing, and teaching online courses?" (p. 362) Behind the research stands the theoretical framework of the theory of vulnerability by Kelchtermans (2009), which focuses on vulnerability in the structural workplace condition and not only the emotions surrounding vulnerability. As education delivery moves online, seasoned faculty may find themselves in a workplace with vulnerability and tension.

Research was conducted using a sampling time frame from 2002-2018 of targeted representation of research in document form in educational databases. For the authors, this targeted research would be most effective in understanding faculty readiness to transition, develop, and teach online courses. Data collection occurred, and 44 sources were selected to be used in this research. The data collection process involved selecting a source and reviewing it for quality in three ways: by quality of press or university, usage in publications, and how many citations used from the works. Analysis of the data discovered five major categories:

1. Evaluation of online teaching/learning 30.44%
2. Teacher's beliefs and identity 26.09%
3. Teaching transition to online 17.39%
4. Teacher's online competences 13.04%
5. Effective teaching process 13.04%

Next, Cutri and Mena (2020) implemented a concept matrix for each source that involved qualitative and descriptive format. Three key concepts emerged from the coding analytical phase that included: active considerations 41.2%, pedagogical considerations 40.0%, and organizational considerations 18.18%. The authors used a constant comparison method, and two overarching themes emerged from the data: affective characteristics and identity disruption. Both authors independently reviewed the concept matrices for theme analysis and then came to a general agreement in analysis.

Data revealed two main themes: affective dimensions and identity disruption (Cutri & Mena, 2020). The authors concluded that online education had come to a pivotal point of usage. Online class delivery would be a significant part of higher education, and online course delivery cannot be opted out by faculty. The authors made the claim that not all seasoned faculty will be

required to teach online; however, faculty readiness is suggested, as the academic culture of higher education is desiring faculty who are flexible and as the structure of course delivery continues to change to multiple delivery formats.

In a recent study by Sales et al. (2020), faculty perceptions were analyzed in response to the shift toward the primary online delivery of education due to COVID-19. A qualitative study was conducted by Sales et al. in three Spanish universities involving discussion groups of experienced faculty and interviews with the same group of faculty. The researchers believed that university education remained a process of acquiring knowledge, understanding, and even mastery of a subject, or subjects, facilitated by faculty. According to Sales et al., the faculty of the social sciences who experienced the impact of teaching during a pandemic in a technological context understood and practiced “information and digital competence (IDC)” (p. 2) during COVID-19.

Sales et al. (2020) conducted discussion groups with social science faculty from three Spanish universities at the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak in early March 2020. After the discussion group, data were documented, a follow-up discussion was conducted through interviews of the same group of faculty members. Sales et al. detailed the radical changes COVID-19 brought to higher education in the social sciences. The evaluation process of teaching and learning had shifted from formal face-to-face delivery of class content to virtual delivery. Sales et al. hypothesized that the shift from tradition delivery of content to more delivery through technology would increase e-learning in higher education.

The objectives for Sales et al.'s (2020) research involved understanding the combination of virtual teaching and mobile technologies, documenting the perception of faculty with mastering IDC. To conduct the research, Sales et al. selected a qualitative methodology to gather data

through discussion groups and interviews. The researchers wanted to critique, reflect, and draw conclusions from qualitative analysis. Sales et al. created three blocks or sections of collecting data from participants.

1. Block one focused on the perspective of faculty and the competency of students with digital information.
2. The second block focused on the perspective of faculty on the responsibility of IDC.
3. The third block focused on the perspective of the faculty and self-competency in working with IDC.

Data were collected by the researchers during 2019-2020 school year, with discussion sessions being held on three different university campuses. Research team members intentionally recruited diverse faculty members who had between 10-30 years of teaching experience. In March 2020, COVID-19 became a global pandemic, and the researchers added this data into the study through April 2020. Then, a second data collection process using interviews with the same sampling of participants was conducted using six specific questions. The interviews were conducted through email with participants in the three universities. Analysis was conducted with the data of this research. Sales et al. divided the data into two groups: before and after COVID-19. Perceptions before COVID-19 and perceptions after one month of dealing with COVID-19 were compared.

The results of this study from the faculty perspective began with faculty responding that students mastered the use of technology, devices, or the use of screens. Mastery of IDC was still lacking due to students lacking academic depth in using the technology. From the perspective of the faculty, students used the technology in a way that promoted academic laziness. From the perspective of the faculty about the mastery of IDC, most faculty members responded using IDC

on a mastery level. Faculty reported the need for more training concerning the use of IDC. Sales et al. (2020) described methodological difficulties with using IDC to teach students in the areas of theory, practice, and library research. Faculty in this study understood that students using mobile devices is a normal practice and were looking for ways to leverage mobile IDC practices and devices.

Sales et al. (2020) explained that, during the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers had a poor review of student assessment and IDC. Faculty reported that the use of IDC during the pandemic was predominately a positive experience. Faculty had to adjust quickly to changes and difficulties with flexibility, adjustments, and continued learning. From the perspective of the IDC and the organization of a higher education institution, Sales et al. explained that university support was helpful and available throughout the pandemic. Finally, Sales et al. reported five concluding thoughts about IDC and COVID-19:

1. Students struggle with IDC.
2. Faculty have difficulties teaching IDC.
3. Universities must assist in the overall learning environment and IDC.
4. COVID-19 placed doubt in the overall capacity of IDC and information.
5. COVID-19 has revealed the importance of IDC and a sustainable higher education model.

An abrupt transition occurred from face-to-face learning to online learning in higher education institutions due to COVID-19, according to Rad et al. (2021). In a study conducted by Rad et al., postgraduate students and faculty, particularly in the dental field at Hamdan Bin Mohammed College of Dental Medicine (HBMCDM), were asked to participate in an online survey, which was a part of a quantitative mixed methods research project that used descriptive

and inferential analysis to examine the data. Overall, stakeholders in this study were satisfied with the rapid transition that occurred in response to the coronavirus. According to this study, the process the stakeholders went through provided a sustainable teaching and learning discussion for faculty and students. COVID-19 brought about challenges for stakeholders in the dental education community. For Rad et al.), the perceptions of postgraduate professors and students in the dental education field were the targeted group to be studied. COVID-19 brought about rapid shifts in dental education and the effectiveness of the adjustments made by stakeholders are important to the field of dental education.

The HBMCDM responded to COVID-19 within authority guidelines, and continual instruction was a primary concern for students enrolled in the school of dentistry. Enrolled students in various stages were able to continue research; however, clinical training had to be halted. According to Rad et al. (2021), the HBMCDM had to transition to more distance learning in response to COVID-19. Most of the classes used a campus-wide learning management system (LMS), and Microsoft Teams was used as well to provide continuation of learning. Faculty had to adjust to the new platforms, teaching sessions, and assessments.

Rad et al. (2021) explained it took only two months for the coronavirus (COVID-19) to spread across continents and become a global pandemic. As a response to the global pandemic, rapid adjustments, and changes in the world of education were implemented. Alternative delivery formats became a top priority for higher education institutions. Due to social distancing requirements placed on nations, educational institutions had no alternative but to embrace distance learning. Particularly in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), this rapid shift took place from March 22, 2020 to June 2020 (Rad et al. 2021). This shift caused many educators to quickly acquire skills in teaching online and adjusting content and delivery methods into a virtual

environment. All elective surgeries were halted, and for health professionals, this decision became a difficult adjustment due to the practical learning that takes place with health students. An online pedagogical adjustment had to be embraced. An effect on the stakeholders was psycho-social stress that impacted both learners and educators due to the rapid shift of educational delivery, according to Rad et al.

This multi-phased, mixed-methods study conducted by Rad et al. (2021) attempted to demonstrate the stakeholders' perceptions concerning the rapid transition to an alternative delivery format. Four sequential phases were part of the study: data collection, data analysis, information integration, and knowledge generation. The data collection process involved a survey that was designed for the study. A Likert-type scale covering eight areas; then a series of yes/no response questions were asked, which involved a qualitative component asking for elaboration. Sixty-three students, and 21 full-time faculty, and online faculty were invited to participate in the study.

The data were analyzed in two parts: quantitative and qualitative. Quantitatively, the data was analyzed using SPSS for Windows version 25.0. Overall, scores of satisfaction were calculated for both stakeholders together and then separately for students and faculty. According to Rad et al. (2021), Cronbach's alpha and the principal component analysis (PCA) were used to help check internal consistency. Independent *t*-tests were used in the quantitative inferential analysis to understand the satisfaction scores of the instructors. ANOVA was used as well to investigate the learners and stakeholders scores.

The data were also analyzed qualitatively using three researchers for thematic analysis. The researchers focused on harmony and discord statements as themes emerged in the data.

Mixed method integration occurred using both the quantitative and qualitative data analysis to build a meaningful narrative.

According to Rad et al. (2021), the results of this study involved 53 respondents out of 63 learners (84% response rate) and 18 instructors, which is an 86% response rate. Reported satisfaction score levels were ( $p < 0.05$ ). a  $p$  value of 0.001 for instructors, and 0.008 for learners respectively. In the qualitative data analysis, four categories emerged from the stakeholders (Rad et al., 2021):

1. Lessons learned and suggestions for the future.
2. Modifications in learning or teaching.
3. Advantages.
4. Challenges.

With the mixed methods integration, Rad et al. found positive attitudinal aspects of the stakeholders involved with quickly adjusting to instruction and learning life through COVID-19. Overall, Rad et al. found stakeholders to be positive while adjusting to new information technology, learning on the move, and modifying behavior as needed during the pandemic to be able to learn and teach. This study showed that, in response to the changes to education COVID-19 brought, both learners and teachers were satisfied with the quick transition to an alternative delivery method, primarily distance education. Both learners and teachers were satisfied with these changes; however, the teachers were more satisfied than the learners by a narrow margin.

Rad et al. (2021) presented findings that revealed a positive satisfaction response to rapid educational delivery augmentation in both teachers and learners in response to COVID-19 in the dental field of education. Learners were positive with changes to the delivery methods, as perceptions to a seamless transition were evident in this study. Stakeholders did report that

distant learning was not able to replace hands-on experience in the dental field. Instructors reported difficulty in the online delivery platform to maintain student engagement and concentration. Both teachers and learners reported adjusting learning and teaching styles to accommodate the online delivery platforms to maximize the learning experience. According to Rad et al., COVID-19 brought instructors a greater appreciation for online professional skill development and for all stakeholders more awareness and opportunities for online education, learning, and growth.

Designers behind online education in higher education explained the choice of using technology in online education has been removed according to research by Bernardo and Duarte (2020). To educate students during COVID-19 required a modality shift to online education. Bernardo and Duarte researched among designers behind online education in higher education and documented the professionals' experiences and perceptions surrounding the pivot that occurred during COVID-19. Circumstances beyond control forced educators to adapt to online delivery. For some educators, that modality was commonplace, whereas other educators were unfamiliar with online modality. The purpose of this study was to describe the experiences and perceptions of higher education academics related to educational design.

Bernardo and Duarte (2020) created an online survey during the quarantine period of COVID-19 and was made available in May 2020 to an education-related contact network of online higher education experts in educational design. A total of 27 questions in the four-part questionnaire were applied, including multiple-choice, scaling, and open-ended questions. Seventy-four respondents participated and 39 answered the questionnaire. Bernardo and Duarte analyzed data according to the following criteria from respondents:

1. The level of familiarization with different forms of technology

2. Trade-off between in-class and online modes; noticeable changes in the learning environment and student learning
3. Experience of teaching solely through online means
4. Virtual reality and perspectives on its applicability to higher education.

In the area of familiarization with technology, over 84% of respondents chose desktop and laptop computers to be the highest proficiency, with virtual reality equipment having the lowest proficiency at 63% indicating no experience.

According to the respondent's experiences with changes in the learning environment, before COVID-19, traditional higher education (including undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral levels) delivery was at almost 70%, a blended delivery was at 25%, with online at 2.74%. However, during COVID-19, online delivery shifted to 88.1%, blended delivery lowered to 10%, and traditional teaching moved to 1.19% (Bernardo and Duarte, 2020).

Respondents noted that teaching completely online required a modification of pedagogy, with 22% having to adjust general activities to online activities, and 19% had to redesign materials and assignments. The data revealed that 77% of respondents had difficulty reading the room during class discussion, and 67.5% of respondents noticed fewer spontaneous teaching opportunities during online classes. To engage the respondents about virtual reality (VR) usage in higher education, only 46% responded with awareness, and 16.7% responded with no awareness of VR. The data revealed 43% of respondents would not use VR in the classroom. Bernardo and Duarte (2020) concluded the research by explaining the shift that COVID-19 had brought to higher education. Designers behind online education will participate in a new normal since the crisis of COVID-19.

In the wake of COVID-19, Perrota and Bohan (2020) examined online teaching experiences of two faculty members in higher education through reflective study methods. The purpose of this study attempted to answer the research question, “How do the researchers’ experiences teaching online highlight professional challenges and opportunities for faculty considering transitioning to e-learning settings in higher education?” Perrota had taught 30 sections of asynchronous online undergraduate survey history courses at three different institutions. Bohan taught face-to-face, hybrid, and asynchronous graduate courses at a large university. Combined, both authors had over 10 years of asynchronous teaching experience. The authors of this study used the experiential-learning ecology model to examine the online environments of four higher educational institutions to document the challenges and opportunities that the authors faced themselves.

The Perrota and Bohan (2020) research described perceptions about their teaching at four colleges that the authors had previously experienced with online courses. College A was a two-year college that enrolled over 20,000 students, and Perrota was responsible for using a learning management system (LMS) to develop and implement courses. College B was a non-profit private university with a student online population that is over 100,000 students, and Perrota was expected to use Blackboard LMS. College C was a public four-year institution that enrolled over 30,000 students, and Perrota participated in an online learning design of courses before any courses were allowed to be taught. College D was a large public university with over 50,000 students, and Bohan was a tenured education professor and was not trained with structured online learning designed courses; however, to maintain a full teaching load, the author agreed reluctantly to teach more online courses at the university.

Data collection for this reflective study involved collecting artifacts from the authors' experiences with the four colleges. Perrota & Bohan (2020) collected the following:

1. University guidelines for online instruction
2. Personal reflective observations
3. Supervisory evaluations
4. Student evaluations and feedback (p. 53).

The authors coded the documents and determined the emerging themes that aligned with the theoretical framework. Then, to analyze the data, the authors examined the institution context where they taught, collaborated on data analysis, and determined trends or themes from their reflection. Perrota and Bohan identified areas where they experienced challenges, advantages, and examined types of professional development that was offered to support online education.

Three main themes emerged from this research concerning Perrota and Bohan's perceptions of the four universities: maintaining student retention, meeting learning outcomes, and providing rigorous instruction were important from the authors' perspectives. The authors described other themes that emerged from the data concerning their own experiences: academic freedom and curriculum control, faculty mentoring and evaluation, professional development, and connectedness to campus community and isolation emerged from the study. Overall, the analysis revealed that institutions who provided adequate online engagement and support for faculty experienced teaching effectiveness and student learning. The participants provided documented limitations for this study in two ways: the participants' subjectivity impacted the reflective methods, and the use of student evaluations limited supporting data for the participants. Perrota and Bohan suggested that, due to the shift in delivery modalities, because of

COVID-19, that more reflective research from faculty is necessary to understand the effect of the pandemic on other faculty members.

### **Summary**

The literature on the COVID-19 crisis in the University setting revealed that COVID-19 had an abrupt impact on the institutional leadership, educational delivery methods, students, and faculty. The abrupt adjustments universities made during the pandemic provided a means of survival for the institution, continuous service to students, and a continuum of learning. The need for more research in the Christian University context can be seen in the literature. This study provides an attempt to close the literature gap on the administrator's response to COVID-19 in a Christian University context.

This chapter explained the abrupt changes that HEI's faced as a direct result of the COVID-19 crisis. Using literature, a thorough explanation was provided that demonstrated the student and faculty changes experienced. However, literature on the topic of COVID-19 and the experiences of administrators has a literature gap. This current phenomenological study attempts to close the literature gap on the experiences of administrators serving at a CHEI. A description of the methodology of this study is addressed in chapter 3.

### III. METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the lived experience of administrators at a Christian higher education institution during the COVID-19 crisis. For the purposes of this study, the COVID-19 crisis was defined as the highly contagious virus known as the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) that was declared a global pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) in March 2020 (Mayo Clinic, 2021).

#### **Description of Research Design**

A phenomenological study approach to qualitative research was selected for this study. The phenomenological approach was the best selection for this study due to the shared lived experiences of Christian higher education administrators leading through the COVID-19 pandemic. Through data collection, the shared experiences of Christian higher education administrators were documented, analyzed, and synthesized to bring understanding to the lived phenomenon that these administrators experienced during COVID-19 on their campus. The interviewees answered questions on how the COVID-19 pandemic affected the Christian college campus from their individual leadership perspectives. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), a qualitative phenomenological study is an ideal research design to gather data for explaining and describing a lived phenomenon. The following section of research provides information on the background of participants, the role of the researcher, measures for protecting the participants

ethically, and the primary research question, the data collection process, validity and reliability, procedures, data analysis, and summary.

## **Participants**

The participants for this study were a criterion sampling population of Christian university administrators. The participants were Christian administrators from an evangelical Christian liberal arts university that offered multiple degrees at the associate, bachelor, masters, and doctoral levels. The sample selection was purposeful, and the criteria for the participants were

- currently serving in an administrative role at a Christian university,
- earned a terminal degree,
- served in an administrative role during the COVID-19 crisis, and
- experienced the shared phenomenon of leading through the COVID-19 crises.

The participants who fit these criteria would best explain the shared, lived experience of handling the crises of COVID-19 in their Christian university context. The sample for this phenomenological study involved four administrators, including one female and three males, from a variety of demographic backgrounds with terminal degrees as described in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Participant Demographics*

	<b>Name</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Years in Role</b>	<b>Degree</b>
1	Participant	M	15	Ed.D.
2	Participant	M	9	Ed.D.
3	Participant	M	16	D.Min.
4	Participant	F	4	Ed.D.

The recruitment process and selection process of involving participants for this study began by contacting a key administrator to offer feasibility and an initial conversation of involvement with participants in this study on behalf of the researcher. A recruitment email (see Appendix C) and consent form (see Appendix B) were created and sent to participants following Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval for this study. All consent forms were signed by participants before the data were collected.

**Role of Researcher**

The role of the researcher for this study was an observer of the participants' described lived experience as a Christian university administrator during the crises of COVID-19. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), in qualitative research, one gathers data by interviewing

through open-ended questions and observing through the senses. The researcher used the questionnaire to assist in the interview process having shared this document with all participants before the interviews. The researcher's own experience in handling crises was bracketed during the interview process with participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The researcher has served in Christian higher education for the last 8 years as a vice president for a southern evangelical seminary. The seminary experienced a near closure in 2013, which involved major crises, i.e., students, finances, personnel, facilities, and accreditation; however, the crisis of COVID-19 in 2020 impacted the seminary differently. The researcher, having seen a campus-wide crisis while serving as an administrator, desired to research other CHEI administrators' responses to the shared phenomenon. A broader perspective on the COVID-19 crises and an CHEI's response from administrators would be a valuable phenomenological study.

### **Measures for Ethical Protection**

Measures for ethical protection for the participants were put in place by using pseudonyms for the name of the participants and avoiding naming the Christian university where participants served. Participants were provided voluntary participation consent forms to each participant explaining the measures for ethical protection (Appendix B). Each participant voluntarily agreed to participate through a corresponding email and signed adult consent form (see Appendix B). All participant personal information was password protected on a personal computer and kept in a locked office. Also, each participant was informed of their rights to stop at any time during the interview process.

## **Research Question**

The research question that guided this study was: What were the lived experiences for administrators of a Christian higher education institution while leading through the COVID-19 crisis?

## **Data Collection**

The data collection process of this study depended on approval from Institutional Review Board (IRB) from Southeastern University. Once the study was approved by IRB, data collection took place during the summer of 2021. Interviews were conducted with participants by using Zoom or a web-based video conferencing service. The web-based video conferencing service interacted with Otter.ai, a transcription program, to provide an accurate transcription of the recorded interview. After each interview and initial transcription were created, the researcher provided the participant with a copy of the transcription for accuracy. Once the accuracy of the document was checked, the document was stored securely until data analysis was conducted. The interview data were password protected on the researcher's personal computer and stored in a locked office.

## **Instruments used in Data Collection**

For this research, the primary instrument used in the data collection process was the interview guide (Appendix A). Seven questions were created to coincide with phenomenological research design. The interview guide provided the participants the opportunity to describe the lived phenomenon of the COVID-19 crisis from a CHEI's administrator's perspective. The interview guide was used to describe "what" and "how" the phenomenon of the COVID-19 crisis was experienced, which follows the research design of this project. The questions were created by the researcher and validated by the committee.

### ***Validity***

The validation process for this qualitative research was built on the desire to be as accurate as possible with “findings by the researcher, the participants, and the readers” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 259). The interview process between researcher and participants in this qualitative study provided openness, allowing participants to share freely from their experiences. The recording process using Otter.ai to transcribe the interviews allowed for accuracy on behalf of the participants. As the interview recordings were listened to and read by the researcher, transcripts were checked for accuracy. Copies of the transcripts were then shared with participants to check for accuracy by email. Participants had the opportunity to check for any errors or adjustments. After transcripts were adjusted for accuracy, the researcher applied triangulation data practices. The use of triangulation involves using “corroborating evidence from different sources to shed light on a theme or perspective” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 260).

### ***Reliability***

After the transcripts of interviews were reviewed by participants, each participant was giving the opportunity to clarify any concerns of misinterpretation. The researcher reassured the participants contextualization of their responses. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), coding is important to increasing reliability. To provide reliability for this research, a systematic data coding process was employed for the data received by participants.

### **Procedures**

Before the interviews began, the consent form was explained to each participant, and the participants were asked if they had any concerns or questions. Each participant was informed of their right to stop the interview at any time for clarification purposes or concerns. Participants were able to share freely without any coercion.

## **Data Analysis**

Data analysis occurred as the interview transcripts were coded according to themes. The transcripts were checked by participants for any inaccuracies. Once accuracy of the transcripts was approved by the participants, the researcher began to classify the data in general terms. Once the data were generalized, the coding process began. Codes were assigned to consistent phrases or terms used by participants to answer the interview questions. The coding process started broadly with themes and moved to narrow categories. The purpose of coding the data was to bring a descriptive analysis to the lived experiences of administrators as they led through the crisis of COVID-19 at a Christian higher education institution. The coding process involved multiple reviews of the data.

## **Summary**

The methodology of this phenomenological study provided CHEI administrators the opportunity to describe a lived and shared phenomenon of the COVID-19 crisis. Investigating and describing the lived experiences of administrators at CHEI, as they led through the crisis of COVID-19, involved a qualitative phenomenological study. The methodology of data collection was to capture the essence of the lived experiences from administrators in the field of Christian higher education through an interview. Participants were chosen on a criterion basis for their expertise and experience. The data collection process was thoroughly presented for validity and reliability. The data for this study were coded according to the recommendations of Creswell and Poth (2018).

## IV. RESULTS

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the lived experience of administrators at a Christian higher education institution during the COVID-19 crisis. For the purposes of this study, the COVID-19 crisis was defined as the highly contagious virus known as the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) that was declared a global pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) in March 2020 (Mayo Clinic, 2021).

The results of this phenomenological study are presented in this chapter. Four themes emerged from the data: unpredictability, holistic community disruption, decisive adaptability, and team collaboration. The themes with supporting data are presented below.

### **Methods of Data Collection**

Once Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was granted by Southeastern University, the researcher began the recruitment process for participants for this study. Four administrators from a Christian Higher Education Institution (CHEI) participated in this study, representing a criterion sampling population of Christian university administrators. The participants were Christian administrators from an evangelical Christian liberal arts university that offered multiple degrees at the associate, bachelor, master, and doctoral levels. The sample selection was purposeful, and the criteria for the participants were

- currently serving in an administrative role at a Christian university,

- earned a terminal degree and experienced the shared phenomenon of leading through the COVID-19 crisis.

The participants who fit these criteria would best explain the shared, lived experience of handling the crises of COVID-19 in their Christian university context in an administrative role during the COVID-19 crisis.

An initial recruitment letter was sent to administrators who served at a CHEI (see Appendix C). Each administrator was given an interview consent form (see Appendix B) along with an interview questionnaire (see Appendix A for review). Once the interview consent form was signed by the participant, an interview was scheduled. Each interview was conducted and recorded through video conferencing, three interviews by Zoom and one interview by Google Meet. An explanation of the interview process was shared with each participant, and each participant was made aware that they were able to stop the interview at any time. The interview, once completed, was transcribed using the application Otter.ai into a Word document. Once the transcription was reviewed and edited by the participant, the content was validated and stored securely following the approved process. After the researcher received a final approved copy of each transcript, the interviews were reviewed, analyzed, and coded for themes.

Upon transcript validation, a codebook was created to start data analysis. The researcher used descriptive phenomenological analysis, as presented by Moustakas (1994), to document significant words, phrases, and the context from each participant. Direct quotes from each participant were documented in an Excel spreadsheet, and cross-case analysis was used to make comparisons among statements from participants. Subthemes were combined and color-coded to provide a description of the lived experiences of these CHEI's administrators. Once the subthemes were organized and sorted, codes were collapsed into themes. After reviewing the

themes that were created from the participants' statements, further cross-analysis was conducted. The themes were combined and collapsed into four main themes that answered the research question.

### **Findings by Research Question**

The four main themes included: unpredictability, holistic community disruption, decisive adaptation, team collaboration. The cross-analysis findings revealed an overall lived experience or phenomenon the participants experienced through the crisis of COVID-19. The results were consistent and answered the research question of this study.

### **Research Question**

The research question that guided this study was: What were the lived experiences of administrators of a Christian higher education institution while leading through the COVID-19 crisis?

### **Themes**

#### **Theme 1: Unpredictability**

According to participants, the crisis of COVID-19 was unpredictable. The unpredictable nature of COVID-19 challenged the administrators and the ongoing operation of the university like no other crisis they had experienced. The unknown and unpredictable nature of the crisis of COVID-19 became a real concern of the university stakeholders. Participant 4 explained,

The first challenge is just the unknown; you just weren't sure what was going to happen. No one expected the entire world to shut down. Never in my life had I ever seen the NFL shut down, golf shut down and every sporting event literally just go silent. One of the challenges is, are we doing the right thing? Are we sending our students home and we shouldn't? Because right when it all happened, we just sent everyone home, and that

was scary. We didn't know what that would look like. Are we making the right decision? Is this all going to blow over in two weeks and then we blew it? That was one of the challenges.

Questions that came from the experienced phenomenon, or the crisis of COVID-19, were unpredictable to answer by the administrators. Administrators were dealing with an ever-changing pandemic that involved the medical community, the government, state regulations, and the campus community. On a regular basis, the usage of the terms “challenge” and “crisis” were consistently used to describe the phenomenon.

Institutional survival that involved steady income became a concern for the administrators at this CHEI. The unpredictable nature of the crisis of COVID-19 caused the administrators to question financial institutional survivability. Participant 1 explained, “It was a time when we didn't know how we as a university were going to get through this pandemic in the 2020-21 academic year, and we had to cut back financially to survive as a university.” Financial cutbacks, survivability, and unpredictability plagued the CHEI in the early stages of the crisis of COVID-19. Institutional survivability involves steady income, students, faculty, and the operation of the institution. COVID-19 was a threat to institution survivability that could cause a domino effect of losing students, affecting income, and impacting faculty and institutional operations.

To Participant 3, COVID-19 was an unexpected life event. Participant 3 shared,

I can tell you the pandemic is one of those unexpected events that happened. And in leadership, you're going to have a lot of unexpected events take place, and the pandemic has, unfortunately, been something that you know we never anticipated. It's

changed the higher education landscape, for sure; early into the pandemic colleges had to immediately transition to online.

The unpredictability of the pandemic, according to Participant 3, changed the higher education landscape. The “landscape,” or the operation of every higher education institution, had to adjust to the ever-changing crisis of COVID-19. Many faculty members had to adjust to online delivery, many traditional students had to transition to online learning, many administrators had to be creative with budgets and personnel, and many higher education institutions had to adjust to potential medical crisis on campuses.

According to Participant 4, the unpredictability of the crisis of COVID-19 caused departments to shift in the way they operated. Participant 4 responded,

And so, the difference between COVID-19 and other crises, I would say COVID-19 affects every area of what I oversee. I have about 13 different departments and COVID touched every single one from food care, to housing, to resident life, to chapel, you know all the different departments, it touched everything. Where other crises only effect, maybe just one group, you know if there's a crisis in housing, it just affects them, it doesn't affect all the other ones, but COVID literally bled onto every single area, and every single area had to shift in the way in which they do things.

This CHEI had to shift or change the way they operated in response to COVID-19. The shifts involved attempting to stop the community spread of COVID-19. Some of the shifts were dealing with disinfecting food service areas and common areas on campus, enforcing social distancing among residents, isolating infected persons, implementing online classes and chapels, and shifting to a more robust online delivery of classes.

Typically, a single crisis is experienced, then a resolution is experienced; however, COVID-19 continued to be an unpredictable crisis. All the participants explained this phenomenon as an “ongoing crisis.” Participant 2 explained the continuation of the crisis of COVID-19. Participant 2 said, “COVID-19 is it’s something that started, and it's something, it's still here, a year and a half later, two years later and it’s something we know, in the end we're going to have to live with.” The unpredictable nature of COVID-19 caused an ongoing operational concern, according to Participant 2. Participant 2 stated,

But, I think, as you know as we learn to live with it, our environment changes, our response changes, but what's been different with COVID-19 is that we've had to figure out how to operate to provide continuity to what we do, not just for the moment, but for the entire year, entire academic program, and entire course.

The experience was described by Participant 1: “I would say that COVID has been different because it's something we've had to live with for nearly two years. It's something that I'm continually having to deal with, and again it's always changing.” The ongoing nature of the crisis of COVID-19 produced an experience of unpredictability among administrators at this CHEI. What started early in 2020 as a crisis became a global pandemic, and then an ongoing unpredictable crisis. As the data were analyzed, administrators at this CHEI articulated an ongoing concern with the unpredictability caused by COVID-19 on the entire CHEI community.

## **Theme 2: Holistic Community Disruption**

According to participants, the crisis of COVID-19 influenced every stakeholder involved with this CHEI. The whole community was disrupted emotionally, spiritually, and physically. Participants stated that COVID-19 was a crisis that was no respecter of persons or institution. The whole community or institution was affected. Participant 2 stated that every aspect of

operations was affected. A government- and CDC- recommended shut down decision was in front of every HEI. Remote learning was front and center. Campuses would have to place procedures for handling COVID-19 and infected persons in practice. Employees and essential workers would have to embrace distance working. Participant 2 stated,

We had to approach and think through how we operated as an institution, and it had to involve every aspect of what we did, leaders from all parts of the organization, to decide on as an organization, where do we stand in, how do we want to continue to best fulfill our mission.

Institutional operations that had to change, according to Participant 2, affected the daily operations of this CHEI.

The overall disruption of COVID-19 was felt throughout the campus. Students, staff, faculty, and administration all felt the effect. Participant 1 explained that the crisis of COVID-19 was different than other crises the university had experienced because COVID-19 spread to the whole community. Participant 1 explained, “I think because this affected everybody, I mean you might have crisis in one particular area of the university or something like that, but this affected the whole campus, the administration, faculty, students, and staff.” The phenomenon of COVID-19 was experienced on the broadest spectrum possible—the whole campus. The traditional students had to embrace online learning as classes went remote, faculty members had to modify lesson plans to accommodate online learning, some staff members had to work remotely, and the administration embraced Zoom meetings instead of in-person meetings. Unfortunately, COVID-19 caused all in-person campus experiences to be reconsidered for a distance digital experience.

The holistic community disruption was seen as stakeholders experienced levels of stress as changes occurred. Stakeholders were upset that the administration chose a distance learning

approach as a direct response to COVID-19. Stakeholders had questions, concerns, and critiques to offer as the administration wrestled with the challenge of holistic community impact.

Participant 4 explained,

Another challenge was dealing with people that were mad about it. Several people were upset, students and parents. Many asked, 'How could you do this? What are you thinking?' It was hard to answer those questions because we didn't know what we were thinking; we are just doing what was best.

The administrators of this CHEI were doing what was best for the whole campus community that was affected by COVID-19.

Participant 1 described student, faculty, and staff community impact. Participant 1 said, Again, faculty and staff with different family issues, as well as students and their needs, were all issues we had to deal with. Even this current year coming in, we've had two students that lost their parents just last week due to COVID. We had one of our graduates that graduated in 2019 just pass away from COVID.

Not only was the community impacted by the loss of life, but the loss of jobs was felt as well. Participant 1 went on to explain,

Letting people go was the worst part of dealing with the pandemic. Fortunately, we didn't have to let go of a lot of staff, but what we did do was, if a staff person left, we froze that position until we could get through the financial challenges we were facing.

Job loss, financial concerns, death, and family issues impacted the entire CHEI community according to the participants.

Participant 3 described the personal and professional impact of the crisis of COVID-19. Participant 3 said,

Covid is totally different because it's an ongoing thing. It's also something that has impacted every individual, whether on a professional or a personal level. It's something that this crisis has bled into our personal lives, and we're constantly having to be aware of that effect. Many of our community members have been negatively affected by COVID-19, and we must keep that in mind we have to continue to lead with that in mind and do everything we can to make sure we're meeting all those aspects of everyone's life and in terms of who we are and what we do at the university, that's for sure.

The crisis of COVID-19 is ongoing, affecting the daily lives of people at the CHEI level. Community members have had personal physical problems after contracting the virus or have had family members contract the virus. Participant 3 embraced an awareness that COVID-19 and the safety of the community came first at the university. On a professional level, COVID-19 caused every job to be analyzed for a moment and to see if adjustments would be needed for that job to continue in light of a pandemic.

Even the spiritual lives of people were impacted according to Participant 4. Participant 4 stated,

Students learned to trust God and trust the purpose that He has for their lives and the trust that the Lord went before us and was going to protect us every step of the way, even though it was hard, we had a lot of positive cases we had a lot of things. You know that were hard to face but we got through it and our students still thrived during it.

The whole person, even the spiritual dynamic of a person, was affected by COVID-19. According to Participant 4, the spiritual dynamic of trusting God and going through the difficulty of COVID-19 challenged the spiritual lives of the community of this CHEI.

When the phenomenon of COVID-19 occurred at this CHEI, a campus-wide response was needed by the administration. Participant 3 explained how the university responded to this widespread community impact. Participant 3 stated,

There was also the challenge of caring for students and employees who got sick with COVID-19 and really making sure that we were meeting the needs of our on-campus students. We had to make sure we're providing good housing, food, medical care for them if they were unable to return home and for supervisors of our staff and faculty, we had to continue to do everything we could to encourage them to lead with flexibility to lead with compassion, to lead with empathy. Those things would be extremely important. And of course, COVID has touched all of us in a variety of ways you have all the unexpected unknowns, we still don't know a lot about COVID-19. We must deal with the loss of life which has been devastating. A lot of families lost jobs. The impact on the community so we must keep all of that in mind, with even what we decide and how we approach, how we will continue to do what mission is all about.

First, according to Participant 3, the administrators at this CHEI cared for sick employees and students who contracted the virus of COVID-19. This virus involved having appropriate on-campus quarantining and medical care for students. Second, Participant 3 explained that staff were encouraged to lead with flexibility, empathy, and compassion with employees who could not return to work. Finally, Participant 3 shared COVID-19 caused disruption of normal life events and even the loss of life.

As the participants explained the holistic community impact COVID-19 had on the community, a growing concern for how the administrators of this CHEI were going to handle things became evident.

### **Theme 3: Decisive Adaptation**

According to all participants, the experienced phenomenon, or crisis of COVID-19, required well-informed responses or decisions that were missional, intentional, and wise; however, decisions, according to the participants, required innovation, flexibility, and pivoting delivery methods to effectively adapt to the ever-changing crisis of COVID-19. All participants described a process of decision making and explained that decisiveness needed to be paired with mission. Participant 3 explained the need to make decisions through the lens of mission and purpose. Participant 3 said,

Be very intentional in every decision you make, with full contextual awareness. I follow a framework that helps us to develop, create, and design responses to issues, to challenges, and to crisis. That's always important. From listening to understanding context to clarifying so that everybody can be on the same page, to then aligning the actions the decisions so that we can seamlessly, continue to operate mission. I think every decision we made or had to make will always be rooted in who we are, rooted in our mission as a faith-based university.

Intentionality in the decision-making process balanced institution purpose and mission with action. Participant 4 echoed the importance of the mission informing decisions. Participant 4 shared,

We made the best decision we could have the information in front of us, and luckily, we're faith based, and a lot of it was just me praying and our administrators

praying that the Lord would lead us in the right direction, and I do feel like I see Jesus has gotten us through the pandemic and now for other Institute's they may not have that on their side.

As a faith-based Christian university, the participants described a faith-in-action process with COVID-19 decisions. Participant 3 went onto explain,

Every decision we prayed about, we asked God to help us, to have everything that we can fully make the right kinds of decisions that would come alongside our community, to further what we know God's called us to do and accomplish. I think if you have that perspective of dependency and trust, you consecrate everything to the Lord. Then you know that you can be strong, you can be courageous, and you can face any circumstance that comes your way and do it with a sense of great faith, a sense of grace, and a sense of peace. A peace that God can provide that goes way beyond what we could ever comprehend; a peace that really gives us the assurance all as well. Gods in control. That's how we've continued to grow and learn and contribute to the issues that we've had to face, especially through COVID.

Decisions were made by a group of experts who held mission as important and filtered actions through institutional mission. That group of experts were administrators and staff members in the field that represented the departments of the organization. Each member of the team embraced an institutional ethos statement. The mission of the CHEI was held as primary importance in response to decisions during the pandemic. The administrators explained that the decisions that were made were influenced by mission. If the decision did not fit the mission of the CHEI, it was avoided.

The intentional decision-making process at the university level was discussed by each participant by pointing to a group of experts on campus who came together to respond to the phenomenon or crisis of COVID-19 and kept the mission of the institution a primary influence. Participant 2 described this group of campus experts as “a massive task force.” Participant 3 explained it this way:

Overall, we had to continue to stay rooted in our mission, continue to communicate what we were doing for the health and safety of our community, and we made sure to gather from the get-go, a strong team of experts around our campus.

This CHEI involved experts from around the campus to inform and guide the decisions that were made during the crisis of COVID-19 by having consistent and regular meetings to discuss any concerns. At times, meetings were called late at night, as changes occurred and decisions needed to be made.

Throughout each interview, the participants shared the experience of “pivoting” in response to the crisis of COVID-19. Once COVID-19 reached pandemic status, the participants explained the first main decision that needed to be decided was pivoting to accommodate social distancing requirements and health safety concerns for all students, staff, and faculty. Participant 2 explained, “So those were, I mean those are the challenges we face is how do you pivot. How do you adjust and how do you continue to fulfill your mission in the middle of a pandemic?” The task force wrestled with pivoting from a traditional course delivery to a robust online or hybrid model of learning due to COVID-19.

This process was explained by Participant 3. Participant 3 described the need to adapt to the ever-changing crisis of COVID-19 as the need to be decisive and yet flexible. The time to

pivot and transition to innovative delivery methods as a university were described. Participant 3 stated,

When the pandemic first began, and things began to unravel a little like most universities across the nation had to immediately transition to remote learning. I am thankful because of our online development our extension campus had knowledge of the right kinds of delivery modes that we would have to now apply to the traditional campus. We had to immediately transition to remote learning and didn't have a lot of days to prepare for that I mean we're talking within a few days, our students and faculty had to transition into a whole new way of teaching and learning, and then returning for the fall of 2020 we implemented a hybrid learning model to social distance and limit of capacities in the classroom.

This process explained the adaptation that took place in response to the crisis. Traditional undergraduate and graduate learning had to adjust to online deliveries. Innovation, flexibility, and adjusting to change were necessary for institutional operations.

Participant 1 explained the need to be innovative during this time of crisis if the university was going to stay relevant. Participant 1 stated, "If you are not moving forward and changing and innovating, you will be out of business real soon. The cell phone industry is a great example. If you don't innovate, you're done." COVID-19 brought about change in the delivery methods of this CHEI. A change in delivery methods would be considered a highly effective response for continuation of service with safety concerns and perimeters in place that required social distancing.

Participant 2 described an innovative delivery method solution to the pandemic. Participant 2 shared,

The third piece of delivery was what we came up with as a creative way for making sure students who were at high risk or had to live with someone who was high risk or just honestly were uncomfortable from a health perspective, because of the virus. We created a new model of delivery just for this last academic year that we called traditional remote. And that allowed students who wanted to still be engaged with the main campus they might have been a junior and they still want to continue their path into a degree that we didn't offer it online. They wanted to have their full-time faculty member they've been with continue to teach them, they were able to zoom in all last year to all of their classes, virtually while being at home. So, we provided different avenues to still support education delivery across multiple modalities, within the same environment.

The operation of this CHEI relied on changing modalities to accommodate student needs, faculty involvement, and the health and safety of the campus. Facing a medical pandemic, this CHEI made the health and safety of the campus community a primary focus and provided safe dorms for recovery. Also, a new traditional remote modality of delivery was created to accommodate traditional students who wanted to continue with classes but had to go online.

Adapting delivery methods, navigating change, and looking for educational solutions amid the crisis of COVID-19 has been ongoing, and the participants shared having wisdom and being adaptable. As more timely information concerning COVID-19 was released by the medical community, the administrators adjusted with decisions to protect the campus community while also providing ongoing educational opportunities. Participant 3 explained,

I think one of the biggest challenges is navigating through. What I would say was constant change, constant changing circumstances. When we ended the semester in the spring of 2020, COVID cases were on the decline, vaccines were starting to be available

nationwide, we saw really a glimmer of returning to somewhat normal life and begin to base our plans on that. However, over the summer, it seemed like, starting in July, August, for sure. We saw a spike of COVID cases in our state in the Delta variant, and that immediately began to alter our plans and in the past two years we've really had to learn to always be prepared for changes that would come rapidly and changes that we would have to quickly adapt to a lot of the circumstances.

A description of “constant change” by the participants is expressed throughout each interview. Participant 3 shared that constant change involved the medical community, the spreading virus, and the effect on the campus community. Participant 1 explained that processing change was a role of the administration. Participant 2 emphasized that higher education is changing on a regular basis, and that it is important for higher education to embrace change to better the institution. Participant 4 recognized that change is inevitable and as a CHEI change needs to be Spirit led.

One example came from Participant 1 on how the university responded to the adapting and changing needs of students and faculty. Participant 1 shared,

It was a tough time dealing with faculty and students with health issues. We did have separate dorms for students who came down with COVID or were exposed to it. We set aside some dorms for those students, and they had meals delivered to them and so forth. And we even rented a campground off campus where students could go, and we served meals to them there while they were quarantined or while they had COVID. We did find that some of the schools in the area were not as prepared as us.

The administration practiced creative thinking, adapting, and changing to assist students and the campus community. Creating separate dorms for infected students to be cared for was an

innovative approach. The use of an off-campus campground was a creative adaptation and solution. As Participant 1 shared, other institutions were not as well equipped in this capacity.

The participants described a persistence among the experts, or task force, to stay well informed of the concerns of the CHEI. That persistence was a part of the decisive adaptation process which would impact the safety of the community. Every decision, as the participants explained, came through the lens of mission, safety, and community impact. Each participant shared that having the most up-to-date information from the medical community and campus community assisted in decisions. A value was placed on listening to the campus community and adjusting as needed to make the best decisions for the whole community. The administrators at this CHEI experienced highly effective teamwork by establishing a COVID task force as explained in the next theme.

#### **Theme 4: Team Collaboration**

According to participants, a response to the crisis of COVID-19 involved communicating clearly through collaboration and teamwork. Communication during the crisis was important to the participants. Participant 3 explained,

I think foundational is this whole issue of communication, during crisis, from a leadership perspective I think it's important in moments of crisis that leaders continually communicate. Communicate frequently, and always have a plan, always have action steps. Here's the issue, therefore this is what we are going to do to address the issue. Here's based on what we've learned how we're going to proceed. And again, oftentimes things can change. I mean, from day to day, in many circumstances.

As a result, a COVID-19 response team was created at this CHEI to handle communicating clearly during this crisis. As the leaders of the institution, the COVID Response

Team would handle all concerns, make decisions, and communicate those decisions to the campus community. Participant 1 stated,

We formed a COVID Response Team. The team started early dealing with our response to COVID. They started that spring, and it was made up of academics, IT, health services, student development, athletics, Environmental Services, the VP for Student Development, etc.

The COVID response team was comprised of leaders from every department of the university. Participant 3 explained, “We wanted to make sure on that team, every voice, every constituency was represented who could speak into the decisions that we would have to make who could be instrumental in navigating those.” To handle the COVID-19 crisis, the administrators of this CHEI created a team of experts to communicate and to lead during a pandemic. Working together is powerful. According to Participant 2,

The power of putting together the right people in the right seats around the table changes everything that you do. We had the right people around the table during the pandemic and we still do COVID recovery taskforce meetings every single week for two hours, it's people from across the institution every functional aspect of what we do. Communication is key in handling the crisis of COVID-19. Participant 3 shared,

So, we must be ready to adjust, and I can tell you our COVID team met sometimes late hours of the night because of certain changes that were happening, but we did it, and we did it in a way that would keep us continually on the forefront of making sure we're communicating; we're doing it with clarity, and everybody understood.

The COVID Response Team wanted a clearly defined and communicated decision shared to the campus community. Clarity was the goal from the team and the goal to inform the community.

Teamwork and collaboration came out of the COVID response team. The COVID response team experienced teamwork across departments in making decisions together, which the team structure allowed for cross-department collaboration. Participant 2 said,

While there was, it was a pandemic, there was the idea of creating a guiding coalition which almost all the schools created a task force or a committee that was their guiding coalition. It's creating a volunteer army, and that's lifting everybody up across your organization for a common purpose.

Participant 1 explained this further,

I was grateful for the tremendous amount of collaboration. Actually, all the way through the whole process with faculty, administration, and staff, we went through this particular thing with a great amount of collaboration. And there were certainly extra demands.

The experience of teamwork and solid collaboration produced effective systems. The systematic way in which the CHEI handled COVID-19 and the establishment of a COVID Response Team was an effective systematic approach to crises. In a reflective response on teamwork, Participant 4 said,

The end isn't in sight but knowing that we've gotten through multiple semesters and still gotten on the other side of it is helpful for us to now look back on and see how far we've come and what systems we've put in place.

The system of traditional remote learning was an effective system, as well as the systematic establishment of the COVID Response Team to handle COVID-19 and future crises.

### **Evidence of Quality**

Evidence of quality that pertains to the qualitative research is important to establish validity and reliability. Creswell and Poth (2018) explained the importance of having multiple strategies for validation. First, as suggested by Creswell and Poth (2018), the researcher provided details from the data that were “generating a rich, thick description” of the phenomenon that the CHEI administrators experienced (p. 263). The researcher then bracketed his experiences as an CHEI administrator, in order to establish objectivity during the interviews. Finally, the researcher participated in peer review of the findings and the codebook by the dissertation committee.

To establish reliability, the researcher used the same procedure throughout the interview process with each participant. A common interview guide was used, a common video conference took place, and a common recording device was used for each interview. Once completed, the transcripts were checked by each participant for accuracy.

### **Summary**

The results of this phenomenological study involving interviews with four administrators from a Christian higher education institution who served during the crisis of COVID-19 provided appropriate data that answered the research question. Through cross-case analysis, four main themes emerged from the data: unpredictability, holistic community impact, decisive adaptation, and teamwork collaboration. A discussion of the results of this study is addressed in chapter 5.

## V. DISCUSSION

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the lived experience of administrators at a Christian higher education institution during the COVID-19 crisis. For the purposes of this study, the COVID-19 crisis was defined as the highly contagious virus known as the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) that was declared a global pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) in March 2020 (Mayo Clinic, 2021).

### **Methods of Data Collection**

The recruitment process began for participants for this study once Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was granted by Southeastern University. Four administrators from a Christian Higher Education Institution (CHEI) participated in this study, representing a criterion sampling population of Christian university administrators. The participants were Christian administrators from an evangelical Christian liberal arts university that offered multiple degrees at the associate, bachelor, master, and doctoral levels.

The sample selection was purposeful, and the criteria for the participants were

- currently serving in an administrative role at a Christian university
- earned a terminal degree
- served experienced the shared phenomenon of leading through the COVID-19 crises

The participants that fit these criteria would best explain the shared, lived experience of handling the crises of COVID-19 in their Christian university context in an administrative role during the COVID-19 crisis.

An initial recruitment letter was sent to administrators that serve at a CHEI (see Appendix C). Each administrator was given an interview consent form (see Appendix B), along with an interview protocol (see Appendix A) for review. Once the interview consent form was signed by each participant, interviews were scheduled. Each interview was conducted and recorded through video conferencing (i.e., three by Zoom and one by Google Meet). An explanation of the interview process was shared with each participant, and each participant was made aware that they were able to stop the interview at any time. The interviews, once completed, were transcribed using the application Otter.ai into a Word document. Once the transcription was reviewed and edited by the participant, the content was validated and stored securely following the approved process. After the researcher received a final approved copy of each transcript, the interviews were reviewed, analyzed, and coded for themes.

### **Summary of Results**

Four main themes emerged from the data: unpredictability, holistic community disruption, decisive adaptation, and team collaboration. These main themes described the lived phenomenon that the participants experienced during the COVID-19 crisis and were documented using descriptive phenomenological analysis that focused on words, phrases, and context of participants.

The four themes in this study emerged from the following process: after transcript validation occurred in this study, a codebook was created that documented words, phrases, and the shared context from each participant. Cross-case analysis was used to compare statements

from each participant. Themes were created, combined, and documented to provide a rich description of the lived experiences of the CHEI's administrators. Once the themes were combined, organized, and sorted, additional cross-analysis was conducted, and four main themes were discovered that answered the research question.

### **Discussion of Research Question**

The research question that guided this study was: What were the lived experiences of administrators of a Christian higher education institution while leading through the COVID-19 crisis?

The framework that supported this research was revolutionary change theory (RCT), which describes changes forced upon individuals, companies, schools, and organizations from the top down. Burke (2018) defined revolutionary change as a "jolt" to a system. COVID-19 was a "jolt" to every individual, organization, school, and business; therefore, under this definition revolutionary change occurred as educational mandates were given to institutions in response to handling the pandemic. Participant 2 described responding to the jolt of COVID-19 with quickly changing in-person classes to the online platforms, which were in existence already and helped in the transition.

Changes were abrupt as described by RCT. Changes did not occur over a long period of time. Government and CDC regulations came swiftly to the college campus as COVID-19 became a pandemic. To attempt to handle a disruption of service, administrators had to make changes in order to continue offering classes to students. Participant 2 explained,

Early on in the pandemic before we knew how to best respond, we had to go remote and we moved quickly, within a week. Within a few days, really, from the moment of making that decision to the moment of needing to continue classes. So, the

immediate response and immediate change in delivery was that all classes were online and the benefit our institution has is that most of our courses, ones we had already, had an operationalized online program.

Delivery methods were modified, campus precautions were put in place, communication with stakeholders occurred, and compliance with the recommendations of the CDC were experienced during the COVID-19 crisis.

### **Theme 1: Unpredictability**

COVID-19 was like no other crisis the CHEI administrators had previously experienced, and this crisis brought a high level of unpredictability. The unpredictable nature of the crisis of COVID-19 became a significant challenge for the administrators of this CHEI. Once COVID-19 was described as a pandemic, Participant 2 explained the unpredictable nature of this type of crisis. Participant 2 explained,

but from that point on, it was a constant battle or a constant challenge of trying to know what was happening and how long was COVID going to last and what kind of impact did it have. Do we come back to normal? Do we have classes in person? Do we offer dorm life? or environments that foster the spread of COVID-19?

The challenges were daily, weekly, and monthly, as Participant 4 described handling the challenges “day by day.” The widespread challenges were with student life, personnel, financial, and operations. The theme of unpredictability aligned with the research of Filho et al. (2020) that pointed to the need for sustainability in higher education through leaders who are “systematic/holistic thinkers” (p.82). Filho et al. emphasized challenges that higher education leaders were facing which can create uncertainty and stressed the importance of handling challenges with innovation. COVID-19 brought transformation to the operation of higher

education among leaders, which promoted creative sustainable solutions as a response. Filho et al. believed that lack of funding would hinder sustainability. Lack of funding correlated with the understanding of participants of this study that recognized the need for sustainability due to COVID -19. Participant 1 explained that it was hard to lay off professors, approximately 40, due to budgetary concerns. However, this decision was made for financial sustainability. Participant 1 emphasized that employees who resigned during COVID-19 were not replaced, and the CHEI froze positions to be filled at a later time. Unpredictability, caused by the pandemic, became an experience that all administrators faced during the crisis of COVID-19. Participant 1 stated, “We are still dealing with COVID concerns. So, you know, there is still a lot happening even nationally, and we are dealing with these issues as best we can.” Continual COVID-19 concerns bring more revolutionary change to the CHEI.

Gigliotti (2016) defined a crisis as a disrupter of normal operations or a challenge for the institutional leader to handle; however, Gigliotti does not describe an ongoing unpredictable crisis. For participant 3, COVID brought and continued to bring a level of unpredictability. Participant 3 stated, “I would say that COVID has been different because it's something we've had to live with for nearly two years. It's something that I'm continually having to deal with, and again it's always changing.” Ho et al. (2021) explained the length of the pandemic as unpredictable, which correlates with this research.

COVID-19, described as an unpredictable crisis, correlates with statements by Kawamorita et al. (2020), who emphasized the shock of unpredictable events that were unique to entrepreneurial university leaders. Also, Desai (2020) described the disruption of COVID-19 as “the world is rapidly adapting to a new normal protocol in education” (p.2399) Desai thought

that the pandemic would last about a year or possibly longer; however, the unpredictable nature of COVID-19 was documented with the length of the pandemic being uncertain.

Holzweiss and Walker (2018) described crises on three levels: level one disasters, level two crisis, and level three critical incidents; however, COVID-19 was a unique crisis with an ongoing unpredictable nature that covered all three levels in a single pandemic. Participant 4 described this poignantly, “I have never experienced a crisis of this caliber.” COVID-19 brought high levels of unpredictability to the CHEI and was experienced and described by the interviews in this study. Unpredictability continues to impact operations and CHEI.

## **Theme 2: Holistic Community Disruption**

Holistic community disruption was experienced by the administrators of this CHEI while leading through COVID-19. Participant 1 said, “This affected the whole campus, and the faculty, students, and staff.” Desai et al. (2020) supported this claim by stating that all walks of life were affected by the pandemic, and that the education community was one of the hardest affected. Participant 2 said, “The area that was most impacted was our main campus because, especially early on in the pandemic before we knew how to best respond, we had to go remote and we moved quickly, within a week.” Campus community life experienced a disruption that would be a revolutionary change in response to the pandemic. Students, at this CHEI, had no other choice, but to embrace remote learning as the main campus dealt with the pandemic protocols. This response correlates with Rad et al. (2021), who explained that COVID-19 took only two months to spread to the world and become a global pandemic, which caused rapid changes to follow in higher education. Alternative delivery formats become top priority, and social distancing requirements provided no alternative but to embrace distance learning.

Switching to remote learning for in-class delivery correlates with research by Zheng et al. (2020), who explained the effect of COVID-19 on higher education as bringing “unprecedented disruption” (p.2) to the community. Online learning became the sole option for faculty and students because of the disruption of service of face-to-face learning. The theme of holistic community disruption correlates with Zheng et al.

Holistic community disruption correlates with research by Gonzelez-Ramirez (2021), who described the challenge of assessment of student learning due to modifying face-to-face delivery to online delivery in response to the disruption of COVID-19. Participant 4 explained that it was challenging for faculty to adjust to assessment of student online learning that were used to face-to-face assessment.

Sales et al. (2020) reported on other global HEI’s that embraced remote learning because of the disruption of COVID-19. For an on-campus student who was used to going to physical class, switching to online became a revolutionary change that was disrupting. Participant 1 shared that students were observed to not have the appropriate learning equipment, internet access, and academic resources. Holistic community disruption was observed during the pandemic that was not as noticeable before the COVID-19 pandemic.

This theme correlates with research by Gonzalez-Ramirez et al. (2021), that explained students’ difficulty with internet access and connectivity, environments free of distractions, and remote learning adjustments. This theme also correlates with Zheng et al. (2020), who reported that students had limited internet and technology access. Not only students, the administrators, along with the stakeholder base, experienced disruptions. Faculty, staff, and supporters were affected by COVID-19. Disruption impacted the entire community around the CHEI. Participant 3 said,

We had to think about employees. We had to think about students. We had to think about parents, donors, alumni, and, of course, the various opinions about COVID-19 and how we should handle it and the safety precautions because you had people on the spectrum, all over the place.

The disruption was personal and professional. COVID-19 caused health concerns, safety concerns, and loss of life at the CHEI. Participant 3 explained, “Many of our community members have been negatively affected by COVID-19.” As a result, all students, staff, and faculty were disrupted holistically, physically, and emotionally by the pandemic. Rad et al. (2021) supported the claim that stakeholders experienced psycho-social stress that impacted both learner and educator due to the rapid shift or disruption caused by COVID-19. Participant 4 explained the strain COVID-19 put on student mental health, student relationships in light of social distancing, student loneliness and isolation. The CHEI community was disrupted.

From the interviews, the CHEI community of this institution described similar experiences that aligned with other HEI’s experienced according to the literature, discussed above. However, as administrators working at a CHEI, the experience of dependence on God that assisted the community during the crisis of COVID-19 was explained, which is a finding that is unique to this study. As a faith- based CHEI, the holistic community disruption affected the spiritual side of all students and stakeholders. Participant 3 explained that “students learned to trust God and trust the purpose that He has for their lives. The trust that the Lord went before us and was going to protect us every step of the way, even though it was hard.” From the data, the disruption of COVID-19 affected students and stakeholders holistically, which included a spiritual dynamic and effect.

### **Theme 3: Decisive Adaptation**

Decisive adaptation was experienced by the administrators of this CHEI while leading through COVID-19. Gigliotti (2016) described the goal of higher educational leadership in the times of crisis was to remain calm, provide clear direction, and engage others confidently in responding to crisis. The administrators of this CHEI experienced an intentional decision-making process that involved change that was mission driven, similar to the findings by Kawamorita (2020), that categorized challenges and solutions into “general” and “mission-related” in the entrepreneurial university (p. 85). The administrators experienced adapting learning and working environments in response to COVID-19 involving mission and decisions. Verbystska and Syzonenko (2020) described challenges and solutions researchers in higher education faced during COVID-19 that moved traditional research projects to online research projects, which correlates with the theme of decisive adaptation.

The theme of decisive adaptation demonstrates and describes a process the CHEI went through to address challenges appropriately and remain purposeful in fulfilling the CHEI mission, which correlates with research by Shim and Lee (2020) who described the importance of emergency remote teaching during COVID-19 to maintain educational purpose at a university. Shim and Lee recognized the need to adapt, prepare, and maintain an academic plan to provide an effective form of educational delivery for future pandemics.

Decisive adaptation began with an abrupt pivot made by administrators, in response to COVID-19, that led to an innovative and flexible educational delivery method. Participant 1 stated, “We need to be innovative. We need to keep looking at other ways to deliver what we do here.” Flexibility, innovation, and creativity in addressing challenges during a pandemic which aligned with the interviews in this study were solutions offered by Kawamorita et al. (2020). The

abrupt pivot set in motion revolutionary change in responding to COVID-19, correlating with Kotter 's (2012) understanding of change by creating a sense of urgency within an organization to provide an easier achievement of change within an organization.

An emphasis on digital distance learning became a necessity to the administration at the participating CHEI early during the pandemic. Strielkowski (2020) emphasized the digital age of education due to revolutionary change that has occurred within higher education over the course of history. Strielkowski believed that this era in higher education history could be called a digital age of education that affirmed online delivery modalities are now viable and valued forms of educational delivery. A digital age of education can be supported from the interviews in this study, as Participant 2 explained that online education is a vital form of education in higher education.

When face-to-face restrictions lightened during the pandemic, administrators of this CHEI continued decisive adaptation and created a hybrid delivery option for students who wanted a classroom experience as well as an online option. Participant 2 explained the use of a high flex model of delivery in response to COVID-19 which provides both online and onsite class options while rotating between 50% of students onsite each class. Participant 2 stated,

When we went back to in person instruction in fall of 2020, we still wanted to provide an educational experience for students, but we wanted to make sure that we weren't encouraging the spread of the virus in the classroom. What we did was we reduced capacity in the rooms to 50%, and we needed to still offer all our students the courses they needed, so even though we could only fit half the students in the classroom, we created what folks are calling a high flex model.

The high flex model using both onsite and online educational delivery platforms is a prime example of decisive adaptation. Administrators responded with a solution with innovation, creativity, and adaptable. Meeting the challenges and changes at the CHEI involved a faculty that understood the importance of CHEI and the willingness to adjust and change. Faculty at the CHEI had to process the revolutionary change as well and follow the decisions that were made at the CHEI. The interviews demonstrated faculty flexibility. Participant 4 observed faculty and student resilience during the pandemic, as students and faculty were practicing a mixture of educational delivery modalities in response to COVID-19.

The high flex model is mentioned in this study through the interviews as another delivery method solution for the CHEI during a pandemic. Mladenova (2020) and Verbytska (2020) mentioned asynchronous, synchronous, and a hybrid-model of learning, explaining that COVID-19 tested existing online delivery methods at most universities. The high flex model of rotating 50% of the class on alternating days and alternating online is a unique finding to this study and is a unique response that involves revolutionary change. From the data, the process of decisive adaptation continues to be a part of the CHEI administrators approach to the pandemic and challenges were met with highly flexible solutions that still fit the CHEI's mission and purpose.

#### **Theme 4: Teamwork Collaboration**

Teamwork collaboration that included experts from all departments coming together as one voice was experienced by the administrators of this CHEI. Participant 1 described this phenomenon.

We formed a COVID response team. They started early. It was made up of academics, IT, health, health services, student development, athletics, environmental services, vice presidents. And they jumped on this right away. They came to the table, in

fact our executive Vice President headed it up, and he said, he never saw such great collaboration, as a university.

As a response to the pandemic, the administrators of this CHEI experienced teamwork collaboration which correlated with research by Oroszi (2018) that emphasized using multiple people in the decision-making process during a crisis. Decisions made in response to the crisis of COVID-19 were made by a group of experts within the CHEI, which included the president, senior administration, and department leaders. Participant 2 called it “a volunteer army.” As decisions were made concerning COVID-19 on the national level, the CDC recommendations, and the local government levels, a top-down decision-making process reflecting revolutionary change was practiced. To respond to the revolutionary changes, top experts in the CHEI were called upon to make decisions together as a team. The goal that was described by the administrators was to provide adequate communication during the crisis of COVID-19, aligning with Northouse (2016), understanding of the practice of leadership, which is described as a process of influence on others to accomplish a common goal. Gigliotti (2020) supported this theme by explaining the process of discussion of a crisis among leaders as *sensemaking*, which has implications on organization life. Executive administration had a voice at the table in the task force, but other expert voices were invited to speak into the decisions that impacted all departments of the CHEI. Participant 1 shared, “I saw a tremendous amount of collaboration. Actually, all the way through the whole process with faculty, administration, and staff as we went through this particular thing.” The process the participants experienced at the CHEI, correlated with research by Holzweiss and Walker (2018), who emphasized assisting HE professionals with training, preparation, and involvement in the crisis with younger administrations learning from senior administrators.

The result of this process was an experience of teamwork and collaboration. The administrators described the experience of this level of collaboration and teamwork, as Participant 1 said, “the best they had ever experienced.” Collaboration that involved practical changes to meet the needs of the CHEI community occurred in many ways with the COVID response team. Participant 2 gave the insight that administrators needed to be “flexible and responsive” amid any circumstances.

Leaders with commentary, expertise, and experience worked together as a team to accomplish a crisis response that valued students, kept to the mission, and provided creative solutions to COVID-19 concerns. Participant 2 described the teamwork collaboration as powerful.

The power of putting together the right people in the right seats around the table changes everything that you do. We had the right people around the table during the pandemic, and we still have COVID recovery taskforce meetings every single week for two hours,; it's people from across the institution, every functional aspect of what we do.

A main decision was to pivot to online delivery from traditional learning. When the decision was made to use remote delivery methods for students, experts in the CHEI community decided to stay student focused, which aligns with a recommendation from Vonderemrse (2018) that emphasized a student-centered approach to higher education to work with students to complete their degrees within an appropriate time frame, even in a time of crisis. When COVID-19 became a concern for the campus community, the COVID task force of this CHEI remained student-centered, collaborated, and adjusted the faculty and student relationship to accomplish learning by providing a variety of online options for all students to remain in classes, provided traditional faculty with training on online delivery methods, and offered accessibility to virtual

conferencing for the faculty to student relationship. Participant 4 shared that faculty had to adjust to delivery formats using technology, engaging students and holding them accountable. Faculty embraced e-learning as a primary delivery method during COVID-19. This understanding aligned with research by Shim and Lee (2020), who claimed that e-learning “contains the greatest similarity of all existing forms of online learning to face-to-face classes” (p.2). Participants of this study agreed that the alternative delivery method of e-learning provided the best collaboration between student and teacher under the circumstances during the pandemic. Participant 3 stated,

Our students and faculty had to transitioned into a whole new way of teaching and learning. Then returning for the fall of 2020, we implemented a hybrid learning model to social distance and limit capacities in the classroom.

The CHEI’s practice of using modern tools to adjust to the challenges of COVID-19 correlated with research by Gonzalez et. al (2020), who believed that replacing face-to-face learning with e-learning was an excellent solution to fulfil social distancing requirements. To accomplish creative e-learning at the CHEI, administrators had to practice teamwork collaboration with faculty, staff, and students.

### **Study Limitations**

The description presented from the data documented the lived experiences of administrators of a Christian higher education institution while leading through the COVID-19 crisis. Limitations to this study existed due to using participants from one university for this research. Only using one university narrowed the population of this research and may not reflect the general population of all Christian higher education institutions.

Another limitation was the difficulty of data collection and interpretation of data with the nature of the ongoing COVID-19 crisis. Typically, a crisis has a beginning and an end; however, COVID-19 continued to be an ongoing crisis; therefore, data collection and data interpretation must have room for adjustments and changes. The timeframe of this research limits this study for the first year of dealing with COVID-19. As participants reflected on their experiences, the limitation of year one of the pandemic was researched and documented.

COVID-19, as a pandemic, caused the limitation of scheduling interviews with participants. The participants were amid a pandemic and dealing with the crisis, which was the primary focus, making the scheduling of interviews difficult.

### **Implications for Future Practice**

Administrators of a CHEI must be prepared for future pandemics. Proper preparation will assist administrators as the ongoing nature of COVID-19 and future pandemics affect institutional life. Administrators, among other characteristics and skills, must be prepared to face crises with stagility: “stability and agility” (Spurling, 2020, p.6) or embracing innovation and adaptiveness in a changing environment. Participants in this study explained this process through the theme of decisive adaptation. Administrators, combined with experts in the institution, came together as a COVID taskforce and practiced stagility or decisive adaptation. As future crises, such as COVID-19, occur, accelerated changes come to higher education institutions (Molchanova et al. (2020). Administrators need to plan to respond with decisive adaptation as this research explains. Professional training that includes the presentation of the four themes: unpredictability, holistic community disruption, decisive adaptation, and teamwork collaboration should be developed as a presentation. Aligned with Holzweiss and Walker (2018) findings, administrators need a practical guide in handling crisis and/or pandemics. This research could

serve as a foundation for pandemic response curriculum for administrators at a CHEI and would be beneficial for future practice.

A major part of adapting, changing, and being innovative involved the delivery methods of education by the institution. This CHEI had an active online program prior to COVID-19; however, in response to the COVID crisis, their online program was modified to accommodate students in their learning process. Modifications, changes, and adapting to newer delivery methods were important to the CHEI for continuation of services to students. Faculty and staff had to adjust, change, and accommodate the students' needs. The delivery method innovation in response to COVID came from a willingness by the administration to embrace a student-centric focus, which involved flexibility, innovation, adaptation, and mission.

COVID-19 caused revolutionary change to occur as this CHEI was handed mandates by the government nationally and locally, recommendations by the CDC, and a response by the campus community. In the future, other revolutionary changes may occur at institutions for higher learning. As administrators, modeling missional change is demonstrated by making decisions that best reflect the organization's mission. Creativity and flexibility should correspond to the institution's purpose and mission. An environment that allows or promotes creativity and flexibility can assist in preparation for future crises. If the CHEI is familiar with an appropriate missional process and environment of handling change that has been created, then the stakeholders could be better equipped to handle crises and revolutionary change in the future.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

For future research, the recommendation of conducting a quantitative study to include all Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU) would be beneficial to compare to the findings at one CCCU to establish consistency of results. To accomplish more research, a

quantitative research survey should be created and administered to executive leadership of all CCCU's in the future to compare findings and validate claims.

This research occurred on a CHEI campus. For future research, a comparative qualitative study conducted on a similar, but secular HEI with executive administrators may produce findings that can be compared or contrasted with this research that may inform institutional practice. CHEI's are privately funded institutions and a comparison to a state funded, similar in size and programs, HEI may produce different results.

### **Conclusion**

The current study explored the lived experience of administrators at a Christian higher education institution during the COVID-19 crisis. Government mandates and CDC recommendations in responding to COVID-19 brought revolutionary change to higher education, causing institutions to pivot quickly to an alternative delivery method to slow the spread of the virus. Administrators in the current study described their experiences and process of responding to the crisis of COVID-19 in four main themes: unpredictability, holistic community disruption, decisive adaptation, and teamwork collaboration. Administrators, who experience a future pandemic, would benefit from this study with insights into the lived phenomenon. Administrators should remain flexible and provide stability in uncertain times. Holistic community disruption was experienced by participants, and administrators should understand the effect a pandemic has on stakeholders in the community. Decisive adaptation by the administrators provided the innovation and changes the CHEI needed to continue to fulfill the mission of the institution. The administrators experienced excellence in teamwork collaboration through a COVID-19 task force that was comprised of experts from each of the departments of the institution. The crisis of COVID-19 brought revolutionary change with high levels of unpredictability and holistic

community disruption; however, the administrators who serve this CHEI embraced pandemic crisis with decisive adaptation and teamwork collaboration resulting in a sustainable model of pandemic response by a CHEI.

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**Appendix A**  
**Interview Questionnaire**

**Name:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Position:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Year of Service:** \_\_\_\_\_

Question #1: What have you experienced through the COVID-19 crisis in relation to educational leadership?

Question #2: What were some of the challenges you faced as an administrator caused by the COVID-19 crisis?

Question #3: How would you describe your Christian university's response to the COVID-19 crisis?

Question #4: How does the crisis of COVID-19 compare to other crises that have impacted your Christian university?

Question #5: How did the COVID-19 crisis impact educational delivery methods at your university?

Question #6: What would be the primary lesson you have learned through the COVID-19 crisis?

Question #7: What else would you like to contribute to this study regarding your experiences as an administrator at a Christian higher education institution?

## **Appendix B**

### **Interview Consent Form**

#### **PROJECT TITLE:**

A Phenomenological study: The experiences of administrators at a Christian higher education institution during the COVID-19 crisis

#### **PURPOSE:**

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to describe the lived experience of administrators at a Christian higher education institution during the COVID-19 crisis.

#### **INVESTIGATORS:**

Karen Ingle, EdD., Chair, Janet Deck, Ed.D., methodologist, Rob Pocai, M.Div., student investigator

#### **PROCEDURES:**

If you are willing to participate, you will be asked to attend a video conference call that will be recorded. The interview will last approximately 45-60 minutes. There will be eight questions that will be asked by the interviewer.

#### **RISKS OF PARTICIPATION:**

There are no known risks associated with this project and your participation in this interview is voluntary. You do not have to participate in this research. If you choose to take part, you have the right to stop at any time. If you decide not to participate or if you decide to stop taking part in the research at a later date, there will be no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

#### **BENEFITS OF PARTICIPATION:**

The results of this research may guide future administrators on the effective practices on handling future pandemics. Your participation may assist administrators in preparation, strategy, and response.

#### **CONFIDENTIALITY:**

In the event of any publication or presentation resulting from the research, no personally identifiable information will be shared.

We will keep your participation in this research study confidential to the extent permitted by law.

However, it is possible that other people may become aware of your participation in this study. For example, the following people or groups may inspect and copy records pertaining to this research:

- The *Southeastern University* Institutional Review Board (*a committee that reviews and approves research studies*)

Some of these records could contain information that personally identifies you. Reasonable efforts will be made to keep the personal information in your research record private and confidential but absolute confidentiality cannot be guaranteed.

COMPENSATION:

You will not receive any compensation for being in this research study.

CONTACTS:

You have the right to ask any questions you may have about this research. If you have questions, complaints, or concerns related to this research, you may contact any of the following people.

Rob Pocai, [rpocai@seu.edu](mailto:rpocai@seu.edu), 601-850-6249 cell  
Dr. Janet Deck, [jldeck@seu.edu](mailto:jldeck@seu.edu), 863.667.5737 office  
Dr. Karen Ingle, [kmingle@seu.edu](mailto:kmingle@seu.edu), 863-667-5414 office  
Institutional Review Board, [IRB@seu.edu](mailto:IRB@seu.edu)

PARTICIPANT RIGHTS:

I understand that my participation is voluntary, that there is no penalty for refusal to participate, and that I am free to withdrawal my consent and participation in this project at any time, without penalty.

CONSENT DOCUMENTATION:

I have been fully informed about the procedures listed here. I am aware of what I will be asked to do and of the benefits of my participation. I also understand the following statements:

I affirm that I am 21 years of age or older.

I have fully read and fully understand the consent form. I sign it freely and voluntarily. A copy of this form will be given to me. I hereby give permission for my participation in this study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed name of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

I certify that I have personally explained this document before requesting that the participant sign it.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Researcher

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**Appendix C**  
**Recruitment Letter**

Dear (Doctor),

Thank you for considering participating in an interview as a part of the data for my dissertation exploring lived experiences for administrators of a Christian higher education institution while leading through the COVID-19 crisis. Because you serve as an administrator at a Christian higher education institution, I value your input.

Your participation in this research will be valuable for future administrators and institutions in handling crises. The interview should last approximately 30-40 minutes. The interview protocol is attached to this email for your consideration. All interview results will be kept confidential, and no one's name will be mentioned in the dissertation.

If you are willing to participate, please digitally sign the attached consent form, and return the consent form to me, Rob Pocai, at [rpocai@seu.edu](mailto:rpocai@seu.edu). In addition, please let me know when you are available for the interview. Thank you for taking the time to be a part of this study.

Sincerely,



Rob Pocai, Ed.D. Candidate

SEU Student