2021

# College Deans' Perceptions of How Their Leadership Styles Affect Graduation Rates

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John Johnston

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Abstract

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MBA, Post University, 2016

BSW, Virginia Commonwealth University, 1980

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

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Doctor of Philosophy

Management

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Abstract

The problem was that in 2016 the U.S. graduation rate of undergraduate students in for-profit higher learning institutions was only 23%, compared to 59% for public institutions and 66% for private nonprofit institutions. The purpose of this comparative case study was to explore for-profit and nonprofit college deans' perceptions of their leadership styles and how their leadership style affects graduation rates. Thus, the focus of the research question was determining college deans' perceptions of their leadership style and how their leadership style affects graduation rates. The basis of the conceptual framework was the full range leadership model. The sample required to achieve data saturation consisted of nine deans from for-profit private higher learning schools and nine deans from nonprofit private higher learning schools. Data analysis consisted of coding and thematic analysis of data collected from one-on-one interviews with the deans, using the constant comparative method to arrive at the themes for each group. Comparing these themes provided insights into similarities and differences between the two groups. The study findings suggested a high degree of similarity between the leadership styles of deans from for-profit schools and deans from nonprofit schools as well as how the deans from for-profit and nonprofit schools perceive their leadership style affects graduation rates. Specifically, the study results provided insights into how and why a transformational leadership style is perceived to affect graduation rates. Based on this finding, educational institutions could create leadership training programs to help deans lead in ways that improve undergraduate graduation rates, thus benefiting universities, students, future employers, and the public.

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# Dedication

There are a ton of people I could mention in this dedication and these people know who they are, but let's just keep this to the love of my life, the sparkle in my eye, my beautiful daughter.

Acknowledgments

How do I realistically list all the people that deserve my sincere thanks and deep gratitude for leading me through this academic endeavor? Should I start by acknowledging Reverend Rucker, who spent a lot of time and effort getting me released from prison some 50 years ago, or Bill Collins, who was a mentor in business management and starting up a company? How about all of my friends, or should I say, ‘family members’, who have died, but not without making me a better person, or the many, many family members who have made my life so much better, and who were right beside me during this long incredible academic journey. Of course, my heart goes out to my daughter, who has been my teammate and partner. I should also include the many doctors that took me on another one of life’s journeys. A huge shout-out to my Chairperson, Dr. L. There is positively no way I would have completed this research study without his guidance and leadership. Thank you, thank you! And a special thank you to Dr. Banner and Dr. Gould for their knowledge and guidance. Finally, I must acknowledge that the low undergraduate graduation rates and corresponding school loan debt in the United States is one of the most significant issues facing us. First, we must pull back the curtain on this big problem, then spend all the time and money necessary to increase undergraduate graduation rates and start to eliminate crushing student loan debts.

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# Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

The graduation rate of undergraduate students attending for-profit higher learning institutions is 23%, compared to 59% for public institutions, and 66% for private nonprofit institutions (McFarland et al., 2017; Shapiro & Tang, 2019). There are several for-profit online schools with a 6-year graduation rate of 11% or below (The Education Trust, 2019). De Freitas et al. (2015) stated that for the United States to remain competitive in the global economy, for-profit, 4-year undergraduate programs must increase graduation rates. Avila's (2016) research showed a positive relationship between graduation rates and the transformational leadership of school leaders. The purpose of this qualitative, comparative case study was to explore private for-profit and nonprofit college deans' perceptions of their leadership styles and how that style affects graduation rates. Insights gained from conducting the study may lead to for-profit, online educational institutions creating leadership training programs for deans to improve undergraduate graduation rates. The findings of this study may also add to the literature regarding deans' perceptions of leadership on undergraduate graduation rates in for-profit and nonprofit higher learning institutions.

Chapter 1 includes a discussion of the background of the study, problem statement, purpose statement, research question, conceptual framework, and nature of the study. I also present the definitions of the terms used in the study, assumptions, scope and delimitations, limitations, and significance of the study. The chapter is concluded with a summary and a transition to Chapter 2.

## Background of the Study

Elrehail et al. (2018) stated that there are three dimensions to institutional leadership: teamwork, motivation, and collaboration with employees; all of which are characteristics of a transformational leadership style. Jones and Rudd (2008) showed that different leadership styles have a significant effect on an educational institution's graduation rate**.** To date, there have been no research studies exploring private for-profit and nonprofit college deans' perceptions of their leadership styles and how their leadership style affects graduation rates.

Dundon (2008) examined the difference in leadership styles of for-profit and nonprofit leaders in higher education and discovered discrepancies in the idealized influence (i.e., behavior) of transformational leaders. Nworie (2012) provided a theoretical framework for distance education based on established leadership theories. The central premise of Nworie's research was that higher education leaders must understand their leadership style and its consequences. Avila (2016) took Nworie's theoretical framework one step further, conducting a mixed-method study based on Bass's Transformational Leadership Skills Inventory (TLSI). The results of Avila's quantitative survey showed that institutions whose deans possessed higher scores in team-building skills, personal/interpersonal skills, and character/integrity (i.e., had a transformational leadership style) had higher undergraduate graduation rates.

Kena et al. (2016) and McFarland et al. (2017) used longitudinal data to examine the graduation rates of first-time college students. They discovered that the graduation rate of undergraduate students attending for-profit higher learning institutions was 23% versus 66% for private, nonprofit institutions (McFarland et al., 2017). The report by McFarland fulfilled a congressional mandate to collect, collate, analyze, and report complete statistics on the condition of U.S. education.

Only a few researchers have examined the leadership styles and characteristics of deans within for-profit educational institutions and how their leadership skills may influence student retention (Avila, 2016; Sypawka et al., 2010). I conducted this research study to explore private for-profit and nonprofit college deans' perceptions of their leadership styles and how their leadership style affects graduation rates in for-profit versus nonprofit higher learning institutions.

## Problem Statement

The general problem was that in 2016 the graduation rate for undergraduate students in U.S., for-profit higher learning institutions was only 23%, compared to 59% for public institutions and 66% for private, nonprofit institutions (McFarland et al., 2017; Shapiro & Tang, 2019). Data from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System indicated that some for-profit institutions have 6-year graduation rates of under 11% (The Education Trust, 2019).

The specific problem was that college deans' leadership styles may contribute to the low undergraduate graduation rate in higher learning institutions and may contribute to the difference in graduation rates between for-profit and not-for-profit institutions. Jones and Rudd (2008) showed that different leadership styles have a significant effect on an educational institution's graduation rate. Astin and Antonio (2012) noted that the traditional predictors of students' success in college, standardized assessment scores, such as the ACT/SAT and high school grade point average, account for only 25% of the variance in students' graduation rates. Jones and Rudd (2008) demonstrated that a transformational leadership style affects graduation rates. Avila (2016) showed a positive relationship between transformational leadership of deans and increased student graduation rates. Anderson (2019) found that community college presidents apply a mix of transformational and strategic leadership styles.

## Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative, comparative case study was to explore private for-profit and nonprofit college deans' perceptions of their leadership styles and how that style affects graduation rates. Use of a comparative case study approach provided in-depth insight into the perceptions of college deans in nonprofit higher learning institutions about their leadership styles and the effect of their leadership style on undergraduate graduation rates versus the perceptions of college deans in for-profit higher learning institutions throughout the United States.

## Research Questions

RQ: What are college deans' perceptions of their leadership style and how their leadership style affects graduation rates?

The subquestions were:

1. How do for-profit higher learning institution deans perceive their leadership styles?
2. How do nonprofit higher learning institution deans perceive their leadership styles?
3. What are the similarities and differences between how deans at for-profit and nonprofit higher learning institutions perceive their leadership styles?
4. How do for-profit higher learning institution deans perceive their leadership style affects graduation rates?
5. How do nonprofit higher learning institution deans perceive their leadership style affects graduation rates?
6. What are the similarities and differences between how for-profit and nonprofit higher learning institution deans perceive their leadership style affects graduation rates?

## Conceptual Framework

The basis of this research study's conceptual framework was the full range leadership model (FRLM). This model evolved directly from the work of Burns (1978) whose premise was that leadership was either transformational or transactional. Transformational leaders inspired and motivated their followers to accomplish exceptional levels of success; contrastingly, transactional leaders took a laissez-faire approach (i.e., hands-off leadership) or a management-by-exception and contingent rewards approach (Khanin, 2007). Bass (1985), a behavioral leadership theorist, expanded on Burns's FRLM by stating that transformational leadership inspires followers to share a vision, become innovative problem solvers, and develop followers' leadership capacity.

Leadership effectiveness is dependent on a leadership style behavior continuum, extending from laissez-faire leadership, at the lowest level of leadership, to idealized influence at the highest level (Avolio, 2011). In a diagram of the FRLM, the primary behaviors associated with the leadership styles, ranging from laissez-faire leadership to transactional leadership to transformational leadership would be arrayed along two dimensions, from least effective and action oriented to most effective and action oriented (Renjith & George, 2015).

The primary focus of this research study was exploring private for-profit and nonprofit college deans' perceptions of their leadership styles and how their leadership style affects graduation rates. The FRLM, a general leadership model, focusing on the behavior of leaders with different styles (Kirkbride, 2006), supported the research concepts identified in the problem statement and provided a conceptual lens for the study.

Academic researchers have used the FRLM to determine the most effective leadership style to attain managerial goals (Xirasagar, 2008). Bogler et al. (2013) used the FRLM to examine the effect of transformational and passive leadership styles of for-profit, online, higher learning institution instructors on students' learning outcomes. Their results showed that the FRLM applies to the asynchronous online instructional setting, suggesting that students' success relates to the leader's style.

## Nature of the Study

I chose a qualitative, comparative case study research design for this study, which I used to explore a phenomenon in its real-life context, thus providing an in-depth and more precise exploration into private for-profit and nonprofit college deans' perceptions of their leadership styles and how their leadership style affects graduation rates. Yin (2018) described this type of case study as the use of several bounded cases to develop a better understanding of a phenomenon. The comparative case study design involved two cases: college deans from for-profit higher learning institutions and college deans from nonprofit higher learning institutions.

I considered the quantitative approach for this study but decided that type of method was not suitable or adequate to address the research question. Quantitative studies involve the testing of theories for an explanatory purpose rather than an exploratory purpose (Yin, 2018). Quantitative researchers also test hypotheses to identify relationships, not allowing for an in-depth examination and understanding of a phenomenon (Creswell, 2014).

Participants for this study consisted of nine college deans from nonprofit, undergraduate learning institutions and nine college deans from for-profit, undergraduate higher learning institutions. The data collection method for this study consisted of one-on-one interviews. The use of semistructured, open-ended interviews to collect the primary data resulted in the emergence of themes that permitted an in-depth exploration into private for-profit and nonprofit college deans' perceptions of their leadership styles and how that leadership style affects graduation rates.

Ryan (2018) asserted that the case study interview and investigative process provides an integrated analysis of data and enables an in-depth clarification of the findings. Ryan described qualitative, in-depth interviews as a rare type of knowledge-producing two-way conversation. Schilling (2006) stated that the interview process provides the researcher with an understanding of an event/phenomenon based on the perspective of the participants.

## Definitions

The following are operational definitions for the terms used in the study:

*Comparative case study design*: A multisited fieldwork model that studies through and across sites and scales (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017).

*For-profit educational institution*: A private learning institution in which the agency or owner receives compensation from tuition and fees; grants and contracts; federal, state, and local government appropriations; sales and service of educational pursuits; and other sources (Snyder et al., 2018).

*FRLM*: This model does not cover all the dimensions of leadership styles; it ranges from laissez-faire leadership to transactional leadership and transformative leadership (Antonio et al., 2013).

*Graduation rate*: A statistical percentage of first-time, degree-seeking students that complete all the institution program requirements within 150% of the allotted time and earn a degree in the student's selected program (Snyder et al., 2018).

*Laissez-faire leadership*: A "hands-off" leadership approach (Avolio & Bass, 1999), or a zero-based leadership style (Yang, 2015). Laissez-faire leadership is a passive form of managing people because it is the absence of leadership (Nielsen et al., 2019)**.**

*Leadership approach:* An extensive range of leadership tendencies and behaviors, including different strategies by which a leader may fulfill a leadership role. Leadership approaches are a continuum of activities, ranging from laissez-faire leadership to transactional leadership and transformational leadership (Bass, 1995).

*Leadership style*: A balance between managerial attitudes and managerial behavior. Tang (2019) described the concept of leadership styles as the one trait most frequently used by the leader to execute their leadership role.

*Not-for-profit educational institution*: An organization or individuals that holds a controlling interest in the institution but only receives compensation for wages, rent, or other expenses and assumes all risk. This type of learning institution can consist of a religiously affiliated or an independently owned learning organization (McFarland et al., 2017).

*Transactional leadership*: A style of management focused on laissez-faire, management by exception, and distribution of rewards, through which leaders maintain day-to-day operations, complete tasks, and exchange goods (Burns, 1978).

*Transformational leadership*: There are four components of transformational leadership: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individual consideration (Bass, 1995). Leaders and followers engage in interactions that take them to a higher motivational plane and a more significant achievement level (Burns, 1978).

## Assumptions

I made the following assumptions in this study:

- The participants understood the questions and gave accurate and honest responses.
- An adequate number of college deans were chosen to participate in the study to achieve data saturation for each case.
- The participants were representative of the population of deans in private higher learning institutions.
- The interview questions were adequate to answer the research questions.

## Scope and Delimitations

In his qualitative, comparative case study, I explored what college deans perceive to be the effect of their leadership styles on graduation rates. The conceptual framework centered around the FRLM, a general leadership model focusing on the behavior of leaders with different styles (see Kirkbride, 2006). An important delimitation of the study was that while it included the perceptions of deans of nonprofit higher learning institutions and for-profit higher learning institution regarding the effect of their leadership styles on graduation rates, the focus was only on a small sample of deans from selected, private colleges and did not include deans from public institutions. Another delimitation factor was that the participants included deans, but not students or professors, of the for-profit and nonprofit higher learning institutions. I also made choices in the design and interview questions that established certain boundaries in the study.

## Limitations

Conducting this research study presented several potential limitations, some of which are inherent in case studies, such as:

- Ryan (2013) indicated that interviewing participants may lead to inconsistencies in the responses; therefore, member checking to confirm their responses was mandatory.
- There was the possibility of a threat to due to researcher bias because I am a student of a higher education institution. I mitigated this threat to credibility due to a possible source of bias by keeping a reflexive journal and ensuring that I did not know any of the participants.
- There may be an inherent limitation on the people who chose to be a part of the study; therefore, the participants might not represent the population of deans in for-profit and nonprofit higher learning institutions.

## Significance of the Study

The graduation rate for undergraduate students in for-profit higher learning institutions in the 2014 to 2015 school year was 23% (McFarland et al., 2017), and some for-profit institutions have 6-year graduation rates of under 11% (The Education Trust, 2019). No previous researchers have explored college deans' perceptions of their leadership styles and how their leadership style affects graduation rates. The importance of this study relates to the need for 20 million new college-educated people in the workforce by 2025 (Carnevale & Rose, 2011). The demand for college-educated people is creating operational pressures on for-profit higher learning institutions to improve student graduation rates (De Freitas et al., 2015).

**Significance to Practice**

Jones and Rudd (2008) and Avila (2016) have shown that using a transformational leadership style has a positive influence on an educational institution's graduation rate. Insights from the current study might lead to an increased understanding of leadership styles that positively affect graduation rates, which may encourage for-profit institutions' management to promote leaders with those leadership styles.

**Significance to Theory**

The purpose of this qualitative, comparative case study was to explore private for-profit and nonprofit college deans' perceptions of their leadership styles and how that style affects graduation rates. The conceptual framework was FRLM, a general leadership theory with a focus on the behavior of leaders with different styles (see Kirkbride, 2006). The findings of this research study may add to the literature regarding deans' perceptions of their leadership influence on undergraduate graduation rates in for-profit and nonprofit higher learning institutions.

### Significance to Social Change

This study's potential importance to social change involves the need for an increase in U.S. college graduation rates in response to the global changes taking place (see De Freitas et al., 2015). For example, the COVID-19 pandemic and the closing of large segments of the U.S. economy resulted in 30 million U.S. workers filing for unemployment in the first half of 2020 (Kochhar & Passel, 2020). Kochhar and Passel stated that the option to perform work remotely, referred to as telework, has been a financial lifeline for many workers. Sixty-two percent of workers with a bachelor's degree or more education had jobs that could be performed remotely, that percentage fell to 33% for workers with an associate degree, and 22% of workers who did not graduate from a higher learning institution (Kochhar & Passel, 2020). Carnevale et al. (2016) presented an even more substantial argument for effecting social change by increasing college graduation rates, stating that for those in the workforce during the recession of 2007 to 2009, a college degree was their most valuable asset.

## Summary and Transition

The purpose of this qualitative, comparative case study was to explore private for-profit and nonprofit college deans' perceptions of their leadership styles and how that style affects graduation rates. Chapter 1 included an introduction, followed by a discussion of the background of the study, problem statement, purpose statement, and the research question. I then presented the conceptual framework for the study, the FRLM, a general leadership model focusing on the behavior of leaders with different styles (see

Kirkbride, 2006). The chapter also included definitions of essential terms, the study assumptions, delimitations, and limitations.

In Chapter 2, I will provide an extensive literature review, including studies that employed the FRLM, which includes transactional, transformational, and laissez-faire leadership styles. The chapter will also include an analysis of for-profit and not-for-profit higher learning institutions. The chapter will conclude with an in-depth analysis of how the global changes currently taking place create an opportunity for positive social change by implementing the findings of this study related to college deans' leadership styles and their effect on graduation rates.

# Chapter 2: Literature Review

The purpose of this qualitative, comparative case study was to explore private for-profit and nonprofit college deans' perceptions of their leadership styles and how that style affects graduation rates. In this chapter, I present the literature search strategy, the conceptual framework, and a review of the relevant literature. The conceptual framework section includes an in-depth review of the literature surrounding the theocratical foundation of the FRLM (see Avolio, 2011; Aydin et al., 2013; Kirkbride, 2006). In the literature review section, I provide an in-depth analysis of peer-reviewed literature on for-profit and not-for-profit higher learning institutions leadership, including leadership styles and models, with a focus on transactional, transformational, and laissez-faire theories of leadership. The literature review also contains an examination of the different factors that make up graduation rates statistics as well as an analysis of current research and studies encompassing undergraduate graduation rates of higher learning institutions. Chapter 2 concludes with an examination of how increased graduation rates in higher education institutions produces positive social change.

## Literature Search Strategy

Machi and McEvoy (2016) proposed composing the literature review by constructing a case for the study based on the study purpose and underlying questions. In other words, the basic idea for a literature review is to build a logical and credible knowledge argument for the study based on research on the study topic. I conducted the literature review primarily by using the Walden University Library and Google Scholar to access peer-reviewed articles from every available management and business database, including Thoreau, Sage, ProQuest, EBSCO Primary, and examining current dissertations. The wide range of publications accessed included *The Leadership Quarterly, Higher Education in Review, Journal of Business Psychology, Journal of Education for Business, Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management,* and *Journal of Business Ethics*.

In a search for research studies about leadership styles in traditional nonprofit institutions or for-profit higher education institutions, the following keywords were used: *graduation rates*, *federal government regulations*, and *institutional leadership*. I also used keywords, such as *transformational, transactional,* and *laissez-faire leadership styles*, to locate current research studies focused on the FRLM. The literature review contains articles and sources published between 2014 and 2020, along with some foundational studies.

In the four sections of the literature review, I offer analysis and synthesis of classic and current literature on higher education leadership and graduation rates, including:

- An analysis of for-profit higher learning institutions and not-for-profit higher learning institutions and the dean's role within these institutions.
- An assessment of the conceptual research on leadership using the FRLM as a framework.

- An academic discussion of leadership theories and the attributes of transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership styles.
- An evaluation of available research on the influences of leadership style on undergraduate graduation rates of higher learning institutions.

## Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study was comprised of the FRLM, a global leadership theory that allows researchers to focus on leaders' behaviors with different styles (see Kirkbride, 2006). In the FRLM, the effectiveness and action orientation of leadership styles, from laissez-faire leadership to transactional leadership to transformative leadership, are described (Antonio et al., 2013).

### Origins of the FRLM

The origins of the FRLM rest on Burns's (1978) premise that leadership was transformational or transactional (Bogler et al., 2013; Nworie, 2012; Williams, 2016). The FRLM model is a cutting-edge leadership theory consisting of three leadership categories (Anderson & Sun, 2017; Sypawka et al., 2010):

- Transformational leaders possess charismatic personalities, consider faculty/students individually, stimulate their intellectual needs, and inspire them.
- Transactional leaders monitor faculty and student performance and offer rewards to faculty or students for performing specific tasks.

- Leaders exhibiting a laissez-faire approach (i.e., hands-off leadership), or a management-by-exception and contingent rewards approach (Khanin, 2007), allowing group members to make their own decisions.

Avolio et al. (2009) expanded the leadership style behavior continuum, extending the model from laissez-faire leadership, at the lowest level of leadership, to idealized influence at the highest level. Renjith and George (2015) postulated that leadership effectiveness is dependent on a range of leadership style behaviors. If creating a FTLM diagram, the primary behaviors associated with the leadership styles, ranging from laissez-faire leadership to transactional leadership to transformational leadership would be arrayed along two dimensions: effectiveness and action orientation.

**The Rationale for Using the FRLM**

On average, only 23% of students in for-profit institutions graduate (McFarland et al., 2017). This low figure contrasts with the 59% of students graduating from public institutions and 66% graduating from private nonprofit institutions. For-profit higher learning institutions' low graduation percentages led to the focus of this study, which was to explore what college deans perceive is their leadership style and the effect of their leadership styles on graduation rates. Avila (2016) showed that college deans with a transformational leadership style positively influenced student graduation rates and called for further research on the effect of leadership style on graduation rates. Consequently, I used the FRLM, a general leadership model focuses on the behavior of leaders with different styles, to frame this study (see Kirkbride, 2006). The FRLM does not directly relate to higher education graduation rates but does help determine the most effective leadership style in each situation (Anderson & Sun, 2017; Antonakis et al., 2003; Williams, 2016). In addition, FRLM supported the research concepts in the problem statement and provided a conceptual lens for the study.

In a comprehensive research study on leadership in higher education, Nawaz and Bodla (2010) recognized the importance of leadership roles and professional development in education. Williams (2016) expounded that the main responsibly of higher education leadership is to facilitate students learning activities and provide an enabling and supportive culture.

The aim of this research study on the deans' perceived leadership styles starts with recognizing that perception is the way people observe the abilities and effectiveness of a leader (see Otara, 2011). Often, leaders perceive that abilities shape the climate and effectiveness of the educational environment (Williams, 2016). Researchers have used the FRLM to determine the most effective leadership style to achieve desired organizational goals (Williams, 2016). Therefore, establishing a linkage between the deans' perceived leadership styles and the most effective leadership style to achieve desired organizational goals, like increasing graduation rates, adds to the literature base concerning for-profit and nonprofit learning institutions. Knowledge gained from comparing the deans' perceptions of their leadership style, graduation rates, and the FRLM could enhance for-profit and nonprofit leadership training programs for deans and other stakeholders.

**Literature-Based Analysis of the FRLM**

It is possible to trace the theoretical framework of leadership back to the mid-19th century, with the leadership studies focused on the leader's character and personality, termed as the trait theories of leadership (Freeborough & Patterson, 2015)**.** By the mid-1950s, research surrounding leadership concentrated on the behavior of leaders, emphasizing the interaction of the leaders with other people, referred to as behavioral theories (Debnath & Mishra, 2017). Next, academic researchers and practitioners leadership concepts evolved to Burns's (1978) theoretical concept of transactional leadership behaviors and the FRLM based on Bass's (1995) leadership style behavior continuum, extending from laissez-faire leadership, at the lowest level of leadership, to idealized influence at the highest level.

FRLM is becoming a mainstream topic in leadership research (Anderson & Sun, 2017). Avolio (2011) showed that the FRLM does not cover all dimensions of leadership but that it is a model encompassing ranges from highly charismatic leaders down to a passive/avoidant type of leadership. Researchers have advanced that leadership theories might apply to the academic community in enhancing teaching methods and engaging students (Avila, 2016; Bogler et al., 2013).

Bogler et al. (2013) explored whether students in online virtual courses can identify their professors' leadership style in the context of the FRLM dimensions. Their results showed that the FRLM applies to the asynchronous online instructional setting, suggesting that students' success relates to the leader's style. Williams (2016) examined the association between FRLM leadership behaviors of higher learning faculty and student satisfaction, using the variables of grade point average, course grade, and quality of the teacher, concluding that the institution's faculty in the study demonstrated one quality of the FRLM, transactional leadership, and that this type of leadership behavior was a statistically significant predictor of student satisfaction.

Nworie (2012) provided a theoretical framework for distance education based on Bass's theory of leadership and the FRLM. The central premise of the framework was that higher education leaders must understand their leadership style and the consequences of that leadership style. Avila (2016) took Nworie's theoretical framework one step further, conducting a mixed-method study based on Bass's TLSI. Avila's results showed that deans who possessed higher scores in team-building skills, personal/interpersonal skills, and character/integrity (i.e., transformational leadership style) had higher undergraduate graduation rates.

## Literature Review

In the first two subsections of this section, I discuss for-profit and nonprofit colleges and universities. For-profit higher education institutions produce a profit for investors and owners while also meeting their learners' needs and are primarily made up of adult students (Davidson, 2016). The structure of a not-for-profit educational institution, also referred to as a nonprofit institution, can be set up as a corporation without share capital, a charitable trust, or an unincorporated association (Neely, 2003).

Not-for-profit higher learning organizations can also consist of religiously affiliated or independently owned learning organizations (McFarland et al., 2017).

The third subsection covers the position and role of the dean in higher education institutions. Past humanist theories centered on students, staff, and school curricula in examining the dean's role in higher learning institutions are discussed. The dean's role in higher education has progressed to include an array of other endeavors, including fundraising, environment management, program oversight, budgeting, and public relations (Arntzen, 2016; Sypawka et al., 2010; Wepner et al., 2015).

I enhanced the literature review section on theoretical leadership development by including leadership styles and models and focusing on transactional, transformational, and the laissez-faire theories of leadership. The leadership theory subsection includes a review of the literature encompassing leadership in higher educational institutions. The literature review section concludes with an examination of current research encompassing undergraduate graduation rates of higher learning institutions. I end this part of the review with an analysis of how increasing graduation rates in higher education schools can positively affect social change.

**For-Profit Higher Learning Institutions**

For-profit higher education institutions focus on meeting the needs of their learners, primarily adult students, while producing a profit for investors and owners (Davidson, 2016). By 2010, for-profit colleges and universities entered a period of increased scrutiny and enrollment decline (Webber & Rogers, 2014). By 2013, the U.S.

Department of Education was becoming increasingly concerned with the high level of student loan defaults at for-profit institutions. Thirty-seven states also began investigating the for-profit higher learning industry for various student requirement factors (Webber & Rogers, 2014).

For-profit educational institutions are organizations where the agency or owner receives compensation from tuition and fees; grants and contracts; federal, state, and local government appropriations; sales and service of educational pursuits; and other sources (Snyder et al., 2018). The for-profit higher learning industry has changed the look and overall outcome of college attendance, especially among a marginalized segment of students. For-profit students are more likely be older and women as well as to come from lower-income and less educated families and racial minorities (Chung, 2012; Iloh & Toldson, 2013; Jez, 2012).

By 2010, 40% of enrolled students in for-profit schools (or almost 6 million students) were 25 years of age or older, 60% of these students combined work with taking an academic course, and 50% attended these institutions on a part-time basis (Bennett et al., 2010). The number of high school graduates who continued their academic endeavors into higher learning facilities has increased. Of the 2.9 million high school graduates in 2017, some 1.9 million, or 67%, were in college by October of that year (McFarland et al., 2017).

Ruch (2003) pointed out that one of the primary reasons for the increased enrollment in academic institutions is the increased economic value of postsecondary education. Another critical reason that for-profit institutions were the fastest-growing part of the U.S. higher education sector in the first 10 years of the 21st century is access to the worldwide web (Carnevale et al., 2016; Ruch, 2003). Within this same 10-year period, online course platforms, referred to as learning management systems (LMS), provided users a gateway to digital classes (Emerson & Gerlak, 2016). LMS virtual courses allow for an instructor to supply an engaging educational experience through video, image, text, audio, and PDF files. The LMS software allows students to follow the course lectures, take notes, perform exercises, and complete exams (Emerson & Gerlak, 2016; Song et al., 2016).

The for-profit education sector is one of the fastest-growing segments of higher education, with enrollment increasing by 236% between 1999 and 2010 (Lynch et al., 2010), and revenue by 40% (Deming et al., 2012). Access to internet platforms such as Blackboard, Moodle, Opened X, and Brightspace, has improved access to higher education and created an exceptional opportunity for growth in for-profit education (Blumenstyk, 2006; Chung, 2012; Gilpin et al., 2015)**.** The for-profit higher learning platform dominated by regional, national, and international education organizations has transformed from a small segment of the U.S. economy into a $17 billion business juggernaut (Allen & Seaman, 2016). For-profit colleges and universities did enter a period of decline and increased scrutiny starting in 2010.

The default rate of U.S. student loans at higher learning schools in 2011 had exceeded 10%; half of the student loan default occurred with students attending for-profit institutions (Webber & Rogers, 2014). By 2017, 41 million U.S. students or former students accumulated over $1.2 million in outstanding federal student loan debt (Perna et al., 2017). The Obama administration focused on gainful employment in the renewed Higher Education Act of 2014 (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). This regulation required that for a student to be eligible for federal financial aid, their loan payments at the time of graduation must be less than 8% of expected earnings or 20% of their discretionary earnings (U.S. Department of Education, 2015).

For-profit institutions of higher education have been under increased scrutiny concerning the legitimate use of federal (i.e., public) funds, questionable management practices, and student recruitment policies, but these universities continue to produce a profit for investors and owners (Davidson, 2016). Tierney and Hentschke (2007) pointed out the suitability of the for-profit school model for adults and working students and how these institutions focus on practical, career-oriented education. For-profit institutions have a long positive history in the United States, likely to endure these controversies and continue in one form or another (Davidson, 2016).

**Not-For-Profit Higher Learning Institutions**

A not-for-profit school, also referred to as a nonprofit higher learning institution, consists of an organization or individuals that hold a controlling interest in the institution, but only receive compensation for wages, rent, or other expenses and assumes all risk (McFarland et al., 2017). The structure of a not-for-profit educational institution can also consist of religiously affiliated or independently owned learning organizations (2017). A not-for-profit organization is either a charity or a nonprofit organization. These types of higher learning institutions can be set-up as a corporation without share capital, a charitable trust, or an unincorporated association, as long as they are not a profitable functioning organization (Neely, 2003). Church-related universities, private research, and most private higher education institutions are usually nonprofit. Public universities are also nonprofit, but these institutions are dependent on government funding, while private nonprofit institutions rely heavily on tuition and fees (Levy, 2009).

Over time there has developed a lack of clarity and distinction between public and private higher learning institutions. Because of political-cultural distinctions in different countries, understanding practices of private education versus public education varies. The active culture practice of state order and substantial family value in China has led to public funding of most private educational institutions (Marginson, 2018). The Nordic (German) model encompassing the social-democratic welfare state folded all educational institutions into a global market arena by promoting policies such as efficiency, decentralization, competition, control, and privatization (Imsen et al., 2017).

To further confuse the issue, five for-profit institutions of higher learning have transitioned to nonprofit status: Grand Canyon University, Ashford University, Keiser University, Remington College, and Herzing University (Busta, 2019; Desantis, 2015). The sale of Kaplan University, a for-profit institution, to Purdue University occurred in 2017. It became Purdue University Global, which the U.S. Department of Education now classifies as a 4-year public university (Blumenstyk, 2017). As stated by Marginson

(2013), it is possible to determine the nature of private versus public higher education by whether the institution's controlling factor is a market competition or the State.

**Dean's Position in Higher Education**

Deans are instrumental to higher learning institutions and the backbone for academic leadership (Zacher & Bal, 2012). They interact with the faculty, adjuncts, staff, and student on a day-by-day basis while representing the administration business and clients (Krintzline, 2016; Tahir et al., 2014). There is no finite definition of the standard dean concept because different countries approached this concept in different ways. In the United States, the term and position of the dean are prevalent in higher education (Murray, 2015), and the title relates to two principal methods:

- Deans are the leaders within a group of departments in a higher learning institution, with the overall responsibility for setting academic guidelines and policies, academic appointments, faculty development, and other administration duties (Arntzen, 2016). Upon assuming the deanship, most deans give up their tenured professor position, teaching, and research activities (Anderson, 2006; Arntzen, 2016; Sypawka et al., 2010). For example, Harvard University is a private nonprofit institution led by 15 deans responsible for the current curricula and academic programs (Harvard University, 2020).
- Besides academic programs and curricula, there is a magnitude of other senior administration positions in higher education that employ the title of dean,

associate dean, or campus dean (Sypawka et al., 2010). Strayer University, a for-profit educational institution, employs 78 campus and associate deans (Strayer University, 2019).

The title of dean in higher education confers walking a delicate administrative tightrope. Deans can serve as an extension of the institution's presidency or the central link to academic and administrative departments.

**Role of the Dean in Higher Education**

While the dean's role in higher learning academic setting still falls back on some of the humanist ideals of the past, their duties have changed tremendously. Dean's roles have evolved from becoming student, staff, and curricula oriented to including a faceted array of endeavors, including fundraising, environment management, program oversight, budgeting, and public relations (Arntzen, 2016; Sypawka et al., 2010; Wepner et al., 2015). The present-day position of deans has taken on the responsibility of managerial and entrepreneurial tasks. Within this supervisory administrator framework, the dean's role is that of a functional leader. They must lead personal and developed the strategic competencies to cultivate solutions surrounding problems within the institution (Anderson, 2019; Avila, 2016). Arntzen (2016) has conceptualized the role and responsibilities of deans into four categories:

- Dean's professional role and strategic responsibility--- communication, development, developing educational strategies, quality control, and obtaining the goals of the university (Arntzen, 2016).

- Dean's administrative role and economic responsibility---fundraising, budgeting, controlling income, spending, and overseeing resources, all within the state and federal laws and regulations (Arntzen, 2016).
- Dean's role in personnel---overseeing Human Resource management and development of Human Resource policies. The role includes being responsible for managing human resources according to state and federal laws and within the institution's strategic goals (Arntzen, 2016).
- Dean's role of cooperation between internal and external organizational components---attending to the interest of the students and departments while developing an organizational culture respected by the private sector, plus the public sector, and is an integral member of the management team (Arntzen, 2016).

Jones (2011) stated that while exercising the necessary skills to meet the challenges of an administrative and academic position, the dean of an institution must always assume a leadership position. Sims and Quatro (2015) pointed out that one of the primary duties for deans is to accept and define their leadership roles. Jones suggested that regardless of where the dean's position falls in the academic hierarchy, either on a rotational basis or appointed from either inside or outside the university, they are first and foremost academic leaders. A crucial task for all deans is to possess the necessary skills that will allow them to take on a leadership position (Arntzen, 2016).

**Leadership Theoretical Development**

In organizational management, leadership is one of the most-studied topics, yet the relationship of employee commitment, performance, and satisfaction to leadership is still a misunderstood factor (Grant & Osanloo, 2014; Ryan, 2018; Tang, 2019). Ng'ethe and Namusonge (2012) established that leadership and management within the context of leadership theory development in the organizational management field are not interchangeable. Management and leadership can complement each other, but leadership deals with supporting and influencing people in the direction that will achieve the leader's vision, by contrast, management encompasses delegating, organizing, planning, and preparing resources.

Zopiatis and Constanti (2010) demonstrated that it is not just a leader's authority or position that influences others, but a variety of factors, such as their charisma or experience. Harms et al., (2017) study and Williams' research (2016) concluded that getting followers to achieve the organization's goals does not correlate to the power of a leader, but that leaders' actions and behaviors are the leading catalyst followers will emulate, thereby allowing them to achieve organizational goals.

Different leadership styles used in a higher learning institution are, in essence, an evolution of leadership theories. Therefore, the following section is an overview of leadership theories/ models, starting with one of the oldest theories (nineteenth century) to some modern versions. Any section on leadership theories must begin with a written caveat by Warren Bennis (1959) published over 5 decades ago: "Of all the hazy and confounding areas in social psychology, leadership theory undoubtedly contends for top nomination… Probably more has been written and less is known about leadership than about any other topic in the behavioral sciences" (pp. 259–260). This research study cannot apply the FRLM without briefly touching on the different management/ leadership theories considered the foundation of this model:

- Great man theories (1840s) --- based on the belief that leaders are exceptional people, born with innate qualities, destined to lead. Leaders acquire inherited traits that differentiate them from nonleaders (Colbert et al., 2012). In Western societies, males and military officers were the primary focus of early leadership concepts (Bohl, 2019).
- Trait theories (1930s to 1950s) --- described some positive or virtuous human attributes, from ambition to zest for life (Bolden et al., 2003). Commencing in the 1930s, the main questions asked by leadership theoreticians were,what traits did effective leaders possess which differentiated them from ineffective leaders, and are leaders' abilities acquired or inherited at birth (Colbert et al., 2012). A literature review written by Ahmed et al. (2016) surrounding the central premise of trait theory, indicated that leadership effectiveness emerges from consistent and stable differences in how leaders think, behave, and feel.
- Behavioral theories (1940s to 1950s) concentrated on what leaders do rather than on their qualities and their styles of leadership (Bolden et al., 2003). By the mid-20th century, leadership theoreticians still could not explain the

effectiveness of leaders using the trait theory, giving rise to the behavior theory of leadership (Dashtahi et al., 2016). Categories of behavior and different leadership styles are the foundation of behavioral theory. Effective leaders who used this style of leadership change their behavior according to the requirement of each situation (Yahaya & Ebrahim, 2016). One draw-back associated with the behavior theory is the premise that the outward behavior of a leader is enough to demonstrate and verify leadership (Ahmed et al., 2016; Yaverbaum & Sherman, 2008).

- Contingency theory (1950s to 1960s), a by-product of behavior theory which follows an assumption that there is no one-way to perform specific leadership task**s.** This leadership theory focused on identifying the situational variables that fit the circumstances and allowed for the most appropriate or effective leadership style (Vroom & Jago, 2007). Asrar-ul-Haq and Kuchinke (2016) research pointed out that leaders exhibiting contingent traits can develop an effective leadership style based on the current organizational situation. A paper developed by Liu (2018), constructed an integrated value-based framework of customers and followers, concluding that the contingency concept of leadership is an amalgamated management theory.
- Servant leadership theory (1970's), the servant leadership theory was developed by Robert Greenleaf (Anderson & Sun, 2017). There are several characteristics shaping servant leadership: conceptual skills, the motivation to

serve others, helping followers succeed and the needs of the followers, behaving ethically, and ensuring interactional justice (Gotsis & Grimani, 2016). A servant leader enhances the follower's strengths and does not focus on criticizing or taking remedial actions. Researchers have demonstrated that servant leaders placed self-interest in a subservient position and that following an ethical path is the focus (Avolio et al., 2009).

- Situational leadership theory (1970's), articulated by Hersey and Blanchard in 1969 as an approach of leadership specific to the given situation (Raza & Sikandar, 2018). Over the last 5decades, the model has undergone several esthetic and in-depth changes which Graeff (1997) referred to as necessary revisions that have improved the theory. Reunanen and Kaitonen (2017) examined different situational leadership styles and proposed that situational leaders demonstrated different leadership qualities at different levels in the organization. The situational leadership concept is that the leader will adjust their leadership style in relation to the abilities and preparedness of followers. There are three leadership styles associated with this theory; a leader might take on a delegating, participating, or telling style of leadership according to the ability and confidence of the followers and their required task (Vroom & Jago, 2007).
- Transactional theory (1970s to 1980s), Burns (1978) defined the theoretical foundation of the transactional relationships between leaders and followers

focusing on the mutual benefits of both parties; leaders deliver such things as rewards or recognition in return for the commitment or loyalty of the followers (Yahaya & Ebrahim, 2016). Transactional leaders synergize on manager's mistakes in the organization; therefore, leaders will have a lower performance expectation of their followers (Anderson & Sun, 2017). This type of leadership tends to focus on contractual arrangements to motivate followers (Asrar-ul-Haq & Kuchinke, 2016).

- Transformational theory (1970s to 1980s), a process by which leaders interact with others, and the leader can create a stable relationship, resulting in increased motivation, both intrinsic and extrinsic, in followers (Avolio & Bass, 1999; Bass, 1995; Bass & Riggio, 2006). The transformational leadership theory is a road map describing a course of action by which leaders can create a stable relationship with organizational members, resulting in increased motivation and integrity for leaders and followers (Yang & Yang, 2019).

As pointed out by Ahmed et al. (2016), various facets of organizational leadership theories and empirical research/ studies have helped define the leadership paradigm. However, as stated by Yang (2014), in the realm of academic science, each leadership theory can bring more questions than answers. It also must be stated, the dynamics of different leadership theories and their correlation with different leadership styles have not produced many organizations that strive for positive social change above accountable profits (Du et al., 2013).

**Leadership Styles and Models**

From the early 1960s into the 21st century, the definition of leadership included different dimensions of leadership styles, representing an array of tendencies and behaviors. These leadership style dimensions included different approaches by which a person may fulfill a leadership role. Ahmed et al. (2016) literature review recognized that a leadership style is a balance between managerial attitudes and managerial behaviors. Tang (2019) described the concept of leadership style as the one trait most frequently used by the leader to execute their leadership role. Alternatively, as characterized by Mango (2018), leadership is an activity that involves influencing a group of followers toward the achievement of defined goals.

Most modern academic researchers stated that leadership theories have shifted over time, from personality-based and behavior theories to situation theory (Ahmed et al., 2016; Avolio, 2011; Mango, 2018). Situation leadership theories focus on the characteristics and skills of the leader in different situations (Boehe, 2016; Vroom & Jago, 2007). Amanchukwu et al., (2015) stated that most contemporary theories of leadership style fall under at least one of three perspectives: leadership is a combination of personality traits, leadership as a process, and leadership skills. Yukl (2012) presented five leadership approaches encountered in most leadership theories: behavioral, trait, integrative, situational, and power-influence.

Within the academic science of leadership theories and styles, there is growing tension surrounding the paradigm of leadership models; leadership and management development for the past century may not fully capture the leadership dynamic of organizations operating in today's knowledge-driven economy (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). In that vein, organizational leadership researchers have developed new organizational models to accommodate leadership theories, such as complexity leadership, shared leadership, leader-member exchange, and substitutes for leadership theory, which focus on situational factors that enhance, neutralize, or substitute for leadership (Avolio et al., 2009). Leadership can no longer be an individual characteristic, but rather a dyadic, shared, relational, strategic, global, and complex social dynamic (Amanchukwu et al., 2015; Avolio et al., 2009; Mango, 2018).

The next section breaks down the FRLM-based conceptual theory, a model that ranges from laissez-faire leadership to transactional leadership and transformative leadership (Antonio et al., 2013). Transactional leaders set up constructive exchanges with employees, set clear expectations, and reward employees for meeting those expectations (Anderson & Sun, 2017). In contrast, transformational leaders motivate, inspire, and provide a vision to their employees, all of which embroils the follower with a sense of self-confidence (Avolio, 2011; Bass & Avolio, 1993). Williams's (2016) and Ryan's (2018) research project considered the laissez-faire style as leadership behavior, whereas the leader tries to surrender their management responsibilities while not showing concern for fellows. Nielsen et al., (2019) referred to the laissez-faire type of leadership style as a passive form of managing people or the absence of leadership.

### *Laissez-Faire Leadership*

Laissez-faire leadership, also known as delegate leadership or *passive-avoidant leadership* (Zacher & Johnson, 2015), is a hands-off approach (Avolio & Bass, 1999), or a zero-based leadership style (Yang, 2015). This leadership style is, in essence, the leader's avoidance of responsibilities (Asrar-ul-Haq & Kuchinke, 2016; Nielsen et al., 2019; Yang, 2015). Laissez-faire leaders demonstrate far-less participation in organizational matters and attempt to delay in responding to critical issues (Pahi & Hamid, 2016). Leaders who use this type of leadership style are not concerned with the completion of duties and are inattentive to organizational productivity (Asrar-ul-Haq & Kuchinke, 2016; Bligh et al., 2018; Pahi & Hamid, 2016).

Laissez-faire leadership is a passive form of managing people or the absence of leadership (Nielsen et al., 2019). A laissez-faire leader negatively affects followers' productivity because they are often unaware of their duties and responsibilities (Avolio & Bass, 1999). Skogstad et al. (2014) showed low levels of followers' self-esteem plus frustration within the follower's ranks because of laissez-faire leadership behaviors. These same authors determined that laissez-faire leadership behaviors are the least effective at generating follower satisfaction. As articulated by Tang (2019), and argued by Yang (2015), the use of this type of leadership model risks the organization displaying several different missions that may come into direct conflict with one another and lead to negative consequences for the organization and employees attitudes/ job performance.

***Transactional Leadership***

Weber first brought this type of leadership behavior to the forefront in the 1940s and Burns expanded it in the late ‘70s as one of several types of relationship between leaders and followers (Burns, 1978; Rath, 2016). The transactional leadership theory focuses on both parties’ mutual benefits; leaders deliver such things as rewards or recognition in return for the commitment or loyalty of the followers (Yahaya & Ebrahim, 2016). Transactional leaders synergize on mistakes in the organization; therefore, leaders will have a lower performance expectation of their followers (Anderson & Sun, 2017). This type of leadership tends to focus on contractual arrangements to motivate followers (Asrar-ul-Haq & Kuchinke, 2016).

Based on a comprehensive study by Oncer (2013), the transactional theory’s foundation consists of three characteristics: contingent rewards, management by exception-active, and management by exception-passive. MBE consists of leaders who monitor followers for organizational rule violations or mistakes and take corrective action if necessary. Management-by-exception-passive is where leaders do not take action except when significant problems arise. Contingent-reward-exchange takes place between leaders and followers to affect organizations’ accomplishments and follower’s performance.

### *Transformational Leadership*

The transformational theory is a process by which leaders interact with others, and the leader can create a stable relationship, resulting in increased motivation, both intrinsic and extrinsic, in followers (Avolio & Bass, 1999; Bass, 1995; Bass & Riggio, 2006). The Transformational theory of leadership is a road map for a course of action by which leaders can create a stable relationship with organizational members, resulting in increased motivation and integrity for leaders and followers (Yang & Yang, 2019).

The transformational leadership theory, as developed by Bass (1995), examines leadership characteristics such as honesty, integrity, empathy, compassion, positive attitude, inspiration, motivation, and dynamic interaction. Bass believed that the transforming leader is consistent with Maslow's theory of human needs whereas it requires a high level of self-esteem and self-actualization for a person to be a successfully authentic transformational leader. Bass' theories on leadership produced a scholarly framework among leading academic researchers, mainly because his transformational leadership theory introduced an ethical/moral dimension into the leader's role (Cox, 2007).

Yahaya and Ebrahim (2016) study aimed to deconstruct the relationship between transformational leadership dimensions and organizational commitment. The paper's systematic literature review analysis showed that transformational leaders' actions could provide a source of encouragement for followers while challenging these followers to achieve organizational and personal goals (Yahaya & Ebrahim, 2016). The transformational theory, as formulated by Bass (1985), correlates transformational leadership with organizational process goals and followers' positive self-esteem and self-sacrifice, while enhancing follower motivation. Transformational leaders respect and appreciate their relationship with followers and encourage them to be more creative and innovative in problem-solving, all the while addressing their followers' need for personal growth, achievement, and empowerment (Anderson & Sun, 2017; Asrar-ul-Haq & Kuchinke, 2016; Bass, 1997).

**Leadership in Higher Learning Institutions**

Due to the multidimensional nature of leadership, it is difficult to provide a universal definition of leaders in a higher educational institution. One of the main reasons for this disconnect is that leaders in education organizations play a critical role in the institution's success and the students (Amanchukwu et al., 2015; Avolio et al., 2009; Berkovich, 2016). Lumby (2019) stressed that one segment of the academic community believed to qualify and define leadership in a higher institution; a person has to compare leadership in these institutions to a business organization. He refined these remarks by stating a contrary argument that educational organizations and business organizations present a distinctly different concept, with different stakeholders (Lumby, 2019; Siddique et al., 2011).

In the 21st century, there has been an increased interest in the roles of leaders within higher learning institutions. One of the primary reasons behind this increased interest in leaders is the changing shape of higher education within a global perspective

(Black, 2015; Zacher & Johnson, 2015). The higher education sector has experienced the internationalization of the marketplace and institutions, development of for-profit online private institutions, cutback in federal and state funding of nonprofit higher education institutions, and cross-border academic mobility (King, 2017). New challenges such as affordability to education, and access to education, have produced a shift from higher education institutions providing instruction to a learning knowledge-based environment (Bennett et al., 2010).

Because of the internationalization of institutions and the competing marketplace, the higher education sector is starting to radically change its structural model (Black, 2015; Zacher & Johnson, 2015). Technology has advanced educational opportunities to the point where students can take classes anywhere in the world and has changed how students interact with the academic staff (Anthony & Antony, 2017). Williams (2016) explained that because of new technology and the changes in how the academic staff interacts with students, one of the main responsibilities of higher education leadership is to facilitate students' learning by providing a supportive and enabling culture.

This educational movement now requires institution deans to shape policies around unit productivity, organizational mission, and student performance (Anthony & Antony, 2017; Puspitaningtyas & Kurniawan, 2013). Shahmandi et al. (2011) reviewed literature surrounding effective higher education leadership and concluded that with the globalization of academics, higher learning leaders must now promulgate a world-wide view of their institution. These leaders need to take a long-term approach, motivate staff and students, direct the business cycle, facilitate change, create a learning environment, and have the knowledge to understand and accept different cultures.

Kalargyrou et al. (2012) demonstrated that academic leaders who do not process the knowledge and performance skills necessary to lead macro institutions would negatively impact all aspects of the institution. They concluded that an academic leader must first and foremost have the necessary business skills, followed by interpersonal, communicational, and strategic skills. Within this research study, the authors recognized that most leaders in education institutions did not have any formal leadership experience and were promoted from members of the faculty; therefore, they lacked formal business leadership skill development, not fully equipped to assume a leadership role (Kalargyrou et al., 2012). Avila (2016) explored effective leadership strategies used by leaders in revenue, expenses, return on investment, and graduation rates. Avila concluded that the leader could influence student enrollment and student retention within this ever-changing educational landscape.

Using effective leadership models and principles, higher education institutional leaders implement tactics and policies to develop faculty potential, encapsulating significant students' performance, plus knowledge-based learning satisfaction of all parties involved; also influencing the revenue stream, retention rates, and graduation rates (Centner, 2014; Hamstra et al., 2014; Krintzline, 2016). Leadership in higher education colleges or universities also plays an important and essential role in a student's professional development (Avila, 2016; Krintzline, 2016). In many ways, institutional education leaders have taken on a role similar to organizational leaders, whereas they guide students into desired fields or professions and selected tasks (Lambright, 2015).

Al-Husseini and Elbeltagi (2016) explored the relationship between academic leaders' effectiveness and different leadership styles. The results of their study demonstrated that faculty members perceived the dean's leadership styles as a combination of the three leadership styles, which conceptualized the FRLM: transactional, transformational, and laissez-faire. Some dimensions of these styles, such as management-by-exception, inspirational motivation, attributes, individualized consideration, and intellectual encouragement, were strong predictors of leadership effectiveness in the educational arena (Bogler et al., 2013; Nawaz & Bodla, 2010; Starcher & Mandernach, 2016).

Firestone (2010) examined the leadership perceptions of higher learning institutions deans, vice presidents, and faculty. The results indicated that these department chairs tend to demonstrate leadership behaviors related to transformational leadership dimensions. Firestone concluded that the primary perception of faculty and academic managers involving the leadership behavior of department chairs is transformational.

**Undergraduate Graduation Rates of Higher Learning Institution**

The leaders of higher learning organizations face increased scrutiny and examination regarding undergraduate student retention and graduation rates. Millea et al. (2018) argued that the best way to define student graduation is in terms of retention rates.

Gershenfeld et al. (2016) stated that by most standards, graduation rates in both for-profit and nonprofit institutions had become the key barometers to assess the university's success or progress. Song et al. (2018) based student retention rates on the percentage of first-year students who are just starting a college-level course and eventually graduate. Numerous studies and literature define graduation rate as the percentage of first-time first-year students of higher education colleges or universities who graduate within 6years (Attewell et al., 2011; Gershenfeld et al., 2016; W. Song et al., 2018).

There are thousands of research studies undertaken and published on graduation rates and student retention in higher learning institutions. Completing a basic search on EBSCO of students' graduation rates and retention rates at universities brought up over 4,000 such studies. From 1975 to 2015 there has been extensive research concerning the topic of undergraduate student retention and graduation rates (Raju & Schumacker, 2015). Numerous studies have centered around specific predictors of graduation and retention, such as student's financial income, race, pre-college background, and their high school GPA (Attewell et al., 2011; Gershenfeld et al., 2016).

Research into higher education graduation rates has come to the forefront because of the 'Gainful Employment' regulations 34 CFR 600 and 668 (Jakiel, 2016). Some members of the U.S.Congress have discussed tying financial aid directly to educational outcomes (graduation rates) and proposed performance-based funding models for receiving financial aid (Dougherty et al., 2016; Hillman et al., 2018; Jakiel, 2016). The 2017 Condition of Education statistical report (McFarland et al., 2017), stated that the graduation rate in 2016 of undergraduate students attending for-profit higher learning institutions was 23%, in contrast to 59% for public and 66% for private nonprofit institutions. There are several for-profit online schools with a 6-year graduation rate of 11% or below (The Education Trust, 2019).

The overall average student graduation rate for all types of higher learning institutions decreased from 54.4% in 1991 to 51.9% in 2012, demonstrating that the student graduation rate has declined for over 20 years (Raju & Schumacker, 2015). The retention rate of first-year returning students in colleges and universities has correspondently also been decreasing over this time-period (The Education Trust, 2019). De Freitas et al. (2015) stated that for the United States to remain competitive in the global economy, for-profit 4-year undergraduate programs must increase graduation rates.

Understanding why undergraduate students succeed and graduate from four-year higher education schools has become a critical focus of academic researchers (Raju & Schumacker, 2015). Raju and Schumacker (2015) explored the characteristics of students graduating from for-profit and nonprofit colleges and universities. They discovered that leaders of these organizations are under pressure from stakeholders to lower costs, increase student graduation rates, and produce measurable positive outcomes. Conger and Turner (2017) concluded that learning institutions with high student drop-out rates and low graduation rates experience loss of tuition, reduced fees, fewer alumni contributors, and a decreasing stock price. Students whom drop-out of higher learning institutions before completing their degree will experience lower employment earning over their working careers, unpaid student loans, and decreased job opportunities (Millea et al., 2018).

Educational researchers have advocated that analyzing data surrounding students dropping their academic careers is a complicated problem, even taking into consideration the standard variables related to graduation rates (Crisp et al., 2018; DeAngelo et al., 2011; Millea et al., 2018). One of the leading causes for not understanding this phenomenon are the different factors affecting over 3,6000 universities in the United States, all with different locations, funding, student demographics, and academic setting (Gershenfeld et al., 2016; Tinto, 2010). Xu (2017) explored retention and graduation rates, and his research revealed a great deal of uncertainty in the literature encasing the different characteristics of college environments and the effect on student persistence. Xu argued that higher learning administrators need to understand the specific factors affecting graduation rates before investing personal and financial resources into retention programs.

Many researchers have developed fundamental theories identifying different variables in college student retention and graduation rates. These studies have focused on multiple reasons: for example, race, high school GPA, financial difficulty/ cost (Gershenfeld et al., 2016; Millea et al., 2018; Raju & Schumacker, 2015). Racial minorities face considerable barriers in higher education, even though students of color make up more than 45% of the undergraduate population (Brown, 2019). As described by

Richardson (2015), colleges and universities still predominantly have a White college atmosphere, and students of color must compete in a bicultural environment—their own and that of the institution, which creates friction between the two.

According to Boatman and Long (2016), one crucial reason students do not complete their academic term is because of financial difficulty. The results of numerous studies have pointed to financial constraints as a factor inhibiting student performance. The student's financial status, such as tuition grants, loans, work-study, and other costs related to attending colleges or universities, tend to play a significant role in student retention rates (Aljohani, 2016; Boatman & Long, 2016; Millea et al., 2018). Whalen et al. (2009) study constructed a logistic regression model demonstrating that receiving financial aid increases the graduation rate and retention rate of first-year students.

Many other factors or catalysts are slowing the retention rate. Student-related factors include academic performance, high school grades, academic abilities (Raju & Schumacker, 2015). Institutional factors and school experiences include the quality of college services and facilities, quality of student-faculty interactions and relationships, academic advising, and the level of academic and social integration (Pike et al., 2014). Family background, which includes family income, parents' level of education, family support, and encouragement, is also a factor (Aljohani, 2016).

A few researchers have demonstrated that leadership style has a significant effect on graduation rates (Avila, 2016; Jones & Rudd, 2008). Avila (2016), in a study based on Bass's TLSi, showed that institutions whose deans possessed higher scores in team-building skills, personal/ interpersonal skills, and character/integrity (i.e., transformational leadership style) had higher undergraduate graduation rates. Balwant (2016) undertook a research study that examined the measures taken by students to succeed and improve their academic performance. He found a positive relationship between academic leaders' transformative leadership skills and increased student performance.

**Implementation of Positive Social Change**

The results of this research study may contribute to social change by increasing researchers' and practitioner's understanding of the leadership styles of deans in private for-profit and private nonprofit higher learning institutions and the perception of the deans on the effect of that leadership styles concerning undergraduate graduation rates. This may add to the literature about creating positive social change within U.S. higher learning institutions, the leadership styles of college deans, and their effect on undergraduate retention and graduation rates. Also, understanding the dean's perceptions of their leadership style will help universities decision-makers select deans who can have a positive impact on graduation rates.

De Freutas et al. (2015) pointed out the potential importance to social change within the United States, a need for an increase in college graduation rates in response to global changes taking place. For example, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused large segments of the U.S. economy to close, resulted in 30 million U.S. workers filing for unemployment in the first half of 2020 (Aaronson et al., 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has enhanced an option to perform jobs remotely, referred to as telework or virtual work. Sixty-two percent of workers with a bachelor's degree or more education had jobs that they could perform remotely; that falls to 33% for workers with an associate degree, and 22% for workers who did not graduate from a higher learning institution (Kochhar & Passel, 2020).

Carnevale and Rose (2011) suggested that by 2025 there will be a need for 20 million new college-educated people in the workforce. Their research showed that because of supply and demand, adding these college-educated workers would reduce the wage premium currently paid to these workers, thereby reversing the decades-long inequality between college-educated workers and noncollege-educated workers.

Carnevale et al. (2016) presented an even more substantial argument for creating positive social change, by demonstrating that during the recession of 2007 to 2009, a college degree was one of the most valuable assets, making people more marketable in an unstable job market. Their study data showed that during the recession, workers who did not have a postsecondary education experienced a very high job loss rate caused by cuts in manufacturing, construction, and administrative support positions.

## Summary and Conclusions

In the literature review, I explored studies related to the low graduation rates of online students relative to not-for-profit institutions. According to the 2017 Condition of Education statistical report, the graduation rate in 2016 was 23%, compared to 59% for public institutions, and 66% for private nonprofit institutions (McFarland et al., 2017). A few researchers have demonstrated that a leadership style has a significant effect on graduation rates (Avila, 2016; Jones & Rudd, 2008). There is a gap in the existing research on the perceptions of college deans' in for-profit and nonprofit higher learning institutions about how their leadership styles affect undergraduate graduation rates (Anderson, 2019; Carton et al., 2015).

I selected the sources described in the literature review to facilitate an exploration of the study topic guided by a conceptual framework based on the FRLM, including an analysis of the origins, rationale, and linkage of the FRLM to higher education leadership and graduation rates (Avolio, 2011; Aydin et al., 2013; Kirkbride, 2006). Two parts of the review explored for-profit and nonprofit colleges and universities. The researchers declared a lack of clarity and distinction between public and private higher learning institutions, especially for-profit institutions that have transitioned to nonprofit status. Next, I explored the position and role of the dean in higher education institutions.

I then examined the leadership theories, concluding with an in-depth analysis of transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire styles, including the makeup of leaders in higher education institutions. I closed this part of the review with an in-depth analysis of how the global changes taking place today affect graduation rates and create an opportunity for positive social change. The next chapter includes the methodology used in this study, a detailed analysis of the comparative case study design for this research study, and a discussion of ethical concerns and potential threats to the study's validity.

# Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this qualitative, comparative case study was to explore private for-profit and nonprofit college deans' perceptions of their leadership styles and how that style affects graduation rates. A qualitative, comparative case study approach allowed me to develop in-depth insights into the participants' perceptions. The literature review illustrated a lack of information concerning higher education deans' perceptions of how their leadership styles affect graduation rates.

Because the goal of the study was to explore internal states, such as the opinions, values, and symbolic constructs of deans, a qualitative approach was necessary (see Stake, 1995). Use of the quantitative method would have limited key findings by constraining respondents options.

The four sections of Chapter 3 help clarify and illustrate in detail the methods I used to collect the necessary data. The research and design section contains an exploration of how the research question was the enabling rationale in the selection of the research design. Also included in the section is a creditable justification for using a qualitative approach and why a comparative case study was appropriate for this study. In the next part of the chapter, I explain my role as the researcher in the implementation and execution of the research, including addressing any ethical concerns or managing any bias within the study design. Chapter 3 also includes a discussion of the methodology for the study, including the data collection tools, the plan for how to collect data, participant recruitment, and the process of data analysis. The chapter concludes with a description of the strategies to enhance the trustworthiness of this study and the importance of following ethical procedures.

## Research Design and Rationale

The rationale behind the qualitative study was the first step in the selection of research design. Baskarada (2014) stated that the selection of an appropriate qualitative methodology must align with the phenomenon explored and the nature of the research question'.

The research question for this study was: What are college deans' perceptions of their leadership style and how their leadership style affects graduation rates?

The subquestions were:

1. How do for-profit higher learning institution deans perceive their leadership styles?
2. How do nonprofit higher learning institution deans perceive their leadership styles?
3. What are the similarities and differences between how deans at for-profit and nonprofit higher learning institutions perceive their leadership styles?
4. How do for-profit higher learning institution deans perceive their leadership style affects graduation rates?
5. How do nonprofit higher learning institution deans perceive their leadership style affects graduation rates?

6. What are the similarities and differences between how for-profit and nonprofit higher learning institution deans perceive their leadership style affects graduation rates?

In this study, I employed a qualitative, comparative case study design to explore a phenomenon in its real-life context, thus providing an in-depth look and more precise insight into college deans' perceived leadership style and its effect on graduation rates. This type of case study involves a researcher comparing the findings of several bounded cases to develop a better understanding of a phenomenon (Yin, 2018).

This qualitative, comparative case study involved two cases: one consisting of college deans from for-profit institutions and the other consisting of college deans from nonprofit institutions. The comparative case design allowed for the examination of a social phenomenon (i.e., leadership) involving higher education institution deans working within for-profit and nonprofit universities. I considered the quantitative methodology for this study but decided that was not suitable or adequate to address the research question. Quantitative studies examine and test theories and hypotheses, and they serve as an explanatory purpose rather than an exploratory purpose (Yin, 2018).

A researcher must have substantial justification for choosing one methodology over all others (Boddy, 2016). I selected the qualitative case study research design because this construct allows for the use of nonstandardized, flexible approaches to data collection and analysis applicable to the purpose of this research and is often used to explore real-world issues (see Ridder, 2017). This design allowed me to explore how deans of for-profit and not-for-profit universities conceptualize their leadership style within the specific organizational contexts of students completing college.

Numerous academic authors have put forth that a qualitative comparative case study design is preferable to a single case study method unless there is a justification for selecting the single case study (Baskarada, 2014; Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Yin, 2018). Eisenhardt and Graebner (2007) maintained that a case study approach builds or extends theory on the leadership phenomenon in academic research and is the most rigorous strategy, especially when a study is grounded on the complexities of the social context under study. Gaus (2017) further justified using a case study method with the argument that with this type of research, the context and the phenomenon are inextricable, and the examination of these interrelated elements allows data analyses within and across cases, providing a deeper understanding of the cases examined.

## Role of the Researcher

My role as the researcher in this project was to implement and execute the design elements, such as finding and selecting the participants, administering the interview protocol, interviewing participants, and analyzing the interview data (see Jacob & Furgerson, 2012). The interview protocol (see Appendix C) consisted of a chronological series of interview questions designed to elicit the participants perceptions and experiences (see Englander, 2012; Rubin & Rubin, 2011).

As the researcher in this qualitative study, I individually interviewed the selected participants in a manner that was both engaging and restrained to avoid dictating answers to them. I used a responsive interview method (see Rubin & Rubin, 2011, p. 16), which enabled me to add a question or restructure a question in response to what the interviewee had said. Rubin and Rubin (2011) expressed that this type of interview process is more gentle, respectful of the participant, and ethical, allowing the interviewer to bring out new information and possible unanticipated interpretations from the participant. The researcher's role in conducting a responsive interview process is not just to be a good conversationalist but also a great listener (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). Equally important, when using a responsive interview process, researchers must be aware that their personal views and insights do not have any bearing on the thoughts, views, or opinions of the interviewees; therefore, displaying objectivity at its highest level is essential (Rubin & Rubin, 2011).

Chenail (2011) stressed that managing researcher bias is one of the top concerns in studies. Knowing that the decisive part of any qualitative research study alleviates the effect of personal bias in conducting the research, I followed systematic steps to block any biases. Following the epoché principle, the researcher should take on an unbiased role as an interviewer and set aside various assumptions and beliefs to allow the participants to present the phenomenon studied in their lived experience (Finlay, 2014, p. 123).

Walls (2015) advocated using reflective journalism as one way to defend against researcher bias. Keeping a reflective journal is the researcher writing within a study journal centered around refining their role as researcher' and their understanding of the participants' responses as well as maintaining collaborative communication between themself as researcher and participants when collecting and analyzing data. A reflective journal method allows the researcher to understand and become conscious of any biases reflected upon the qualitative research (Vicary et al., 2017). Accordingly, the researcher's role is to remain neutral and open to the participants' responses and always question their preferences as the researcher.

To address issues and concerns of confirmability and to reduce possible bias, I used a member-checking process, which, as described by Yin (2018), allows the interviewees to provide their thoughts and perspective on the data collected in the interview. Each participating dean in the study had a chance to review a transcription and analysis of their interview to confirm or add to the suggested meaning of their responses.

I am a student of a higher education institution, and the focus of this research study was on higher education leaders. Being a university student raised potential ethical concerns, which I mitigated by ensuring that I did not know any of the participants. Furthermore, the study participants were not a part of an at-risk group, and participation in the study did not present any serious risk of emotional or psychological harm to the participants.

## Methodology

A research methodology embedded in a study is the techniques or procedures used to identify, process, and analyze information surrounding a topic (Ravitch & Carl, 2015). Using a qualitative method allows the researcher to interpret and develop an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon (Burkholder et al.). Based on the study's conceptual framework and purpose, I used a qualitative, comparative case study design. The comparative case study design involved two cases: college deans from for-profit institutions and college deans from nonprofit institutions. I collected data from open-ended participant interviews'.

**Participant Selection Logic**

The population for this study consisted of college deans of private, for-profit, undergraduate learning institutions and college deans of private, nonprofit, undergraduate higher learning organizations. Yin (2018) expounded that using a qualitative comparative case design results in more compelling details and helps justify the sampling strategy, including the sample size relationship to saturation. Palinkas et al. (2015) supported the use of a purposeful sample in qualitative research when seeking to identify and select information-rich participants related to the current phenomenon of interest. It was not possible and practical to collect data from all participants affected by the research problem; therefore, it was essential to use purposive sampling and collect data from nine or more deans from a few, private, for-profit higher learning schools and nine or more deans from a few, private, nonprofit higher learning schools.

The eligibility criterion for the study participants was that they work as academic deans in for-profit or nonprofit higher learning institutions. In most universities, an academic dean leads a specific academic unit consisting of teachers, students, and staff, such as Harvard's Kennedy School or Penn State's University College of

Communications. Deans are instrumental to these institutions and the backbone for academic leadership (Zacher & Bal, 2012). They interact with the faculty, adjuncts, staff, and students on a day-by-day basis, while representing the administration, business, and clients (Krintzline, 2016; Tahir et al., 2014).

In the United States, the term and position of the dean are prevalent in higher education (Murray, 2015). Deans are responsible for setting academic guidelines and policies, academic appointments, faculty development, and other administration duties Krintzline, 2016. Besides academic programs and curricula, there are other senior administration positions in higher education that employ the title of dean, associate dean, or campus dean (Sypawka et al., 2010). Deans can serve as an extension of the institution's presidency or the central link to academic and administrative departments.

Jones (2011) stated that along with exercising the necessary skills to meet the challenges of an administrative and academic position, the dean of an institution must always act as a leader. Sims and Quatro (2015) pointed out that one of the primary duties of deans is to accept and define their leadership roles. Jones argued that regardless of where a dean's position falls in the academic hierarchy, either on a rotational basis or appointed from inside or outside the university, they are first and foremost academic leaders. A crucial task for all deans is to possess the skills necessary to be successful in a leadership position.

Participant selection was an essential part of this study considering the nature of the research; therefore, the purposeful sampling frame included a few deans within private for-profit and private nonprofit institutions. For example, Harvard University (2020) is a private, nonprofit institution led by 15 deans responsible for the current curricula and academic programs. Strayer University (2019), a for-profit educational institution, employs 78 campus and associate deans.

A purchased list from bookyourdata.com that fit the selection criteria of being an academic dean in either a private for-profit or private nonprofit higher learning institution was the starting point for the recruitment of deans. The list of deans is available to all paid members. As the next step, I sent an introductory email to academic deans in non-profit and for-profit higher education schools that were selected from the bookyourdata.com purchased list  asking for their participation. I then followed up by sending the deans who volunteered for the study a consent form, acknowledging confidentiality and protection of their rights in the research (see Baskarada, 2014; Stake, 1995).

Glaser and Strauss (2009) explained saturation as a point of diminishing return in the data analysis (i.e., when the analysis does not uncover any new themes). The frequency of interviewing the deans and coding and interpreting the data continued until data saturation occurred (see Saunders et al., 2018). Thus, it was imperative to have a few deans who volunteered to be in the research study on a stand-by list in case more than nine deans from the for-profit higher learning schools and nine deans from the nonprofit higher learning schools were necessary to achieve data saturation.

**Instrumentation**

The data collection instrument was a critical part of the research process. A well-developed, well-organized, and consistent data collection strategy allows for the data collection to be efficient (Klenke, 2016). The use of semistructured, open-ended interviews to collect the primary study data resulted in the emergence of themes that permit an in-depth understanding of college deans' perception of how their leadership styles affect graduation rates.

Ryan (2018) stipulated that the case study interview and investigative process provides an integrated analysis of data and enables an in-depth clarification of the findings. The author described qualitative in-depth interviews as a rare type of knowledge-producing two-way conversation. Schilling (2006) postulated that the interview process would be the correct choice for case studies, providing the researcher with an understanding of an event/phenomenon based on the perspective of the participants.

The interview process of the study was a responsive interview technique, allowing the interviewer to have enough flexibility to change or add to the question in response to what each interviewee was saying. This type of interviewing model can sometimes elicit unexpected information. As Rubin and Rubin (2011) expressed, responsive interviewing help make the interview process more gentle, respectful, and ethical. The responsive interviewing technique must involve the interviewer, not just being a good conversationalist but also a good listener.

As the interviewer, I used a qualitative semistructured interview process to guide data collection from the participants. These interview questions were field-tested by a trio of management experts familiar with the topic and research method for the study. Using the interview process allowed the participating deans to articulate their responses, also allowing the interviewer the flexibility to maintain control of the interview process. This interview process enabled me to collect the primary data needed to answer the study research questions.

Embedded within the interview protocol (see Appendix C) is a list of questions that provide an avenue for the interviewer to probe, uncover, and ask follow-up questions. These questions cover and illustrate a subject while maintaining the consistency surrounding the subject matter. Yin (2018) stated that the interview protocol is an effective way of retaining control over the questions and the interview process.

The data collection instrument used in this study included a structured interview protocol, along with an invitation to participate which was an introductory email to deans in two or more institutions asking for their participation. Plus, a consent form outlines the study, procedures, risks, and benefits, and the voluntary nature of the research. The interview process and protocol (see Appendix B and Appendix C) consist of a chronological series of interview questions designed to elicit the participants' perceptions and experiences (Englander, 2012; Rubin & Rubin, 2011).

The interview with the deans of higher learning institutions consisted of a few open-ended questions; each one focused on examining a single component of the research problem. The interview process allowed for follow-up questions, which explored the participants' answers to the main question, seeking more detailed explanations, modifications, or clarity surrounding concepts/ themes they mentioned. Using unscripted probing questions also help the researcher to manage the interview, elicit additional information pertinent to the interview questions, request clarification, and encourage the participant to complete an idea they had touched on (Rubin & Rubin, 2011).

As the interviewer, I have developed the interview questions and follow-up questions (see Appendix C), focusing on the behavior of leaders with different styles. The interview questions encapsulate a leadership style behavior continuum, extending from laissez-faire leadership, at the lowest level of leadership, to idealized influence at the highest level, which are the constructs of the FRLM.

**Expert Review**

I conducted an expert review to check the credibility of the interview questions for the study. The expert review involved asking three experts, the chairperson of my committee, the second committee member, and the third member assigned to the committee, to provide feedback on the appropriateness of the interview questions based on the study's purpose statement, research question, and specific problem (see Appendix A).

The feedback took the form of answers to four questions regarding the interview questions:

1. Are the interview questions clear?

2. Are the interview questions appropriate for the design (comparative case study)?
3. Will the interview questions adequately answer the research question?
4. What changes, if any, would you make to the interview questions? Why?

The results of the expert review led to some important refinements to the original interview questions in Appendix A, but no major changes. The revised interview questions are in Appendix C.

**Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection**

Data collection commenced after the dissertation committee, and Walden's Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved the study. I started the participant recruitment process by preparing a list of deans and their institutions purchased from bookyourdata.com. The list of deans is available to all paid members. I selected deans that meet the following criteria: work as academic deans in private for-profit or private nonprofit higher learning institutions in the United States.

All deans who agree to participate in the study received a consent form that outlines the study, procedures, risks, benefits and the voluntary nature of the research. The deans provided their informed consent by replying "I consent" to the email. The next step was preparing the resources required to conduct the audio interview based on the Zoom cloud platform.

At this point in the project, the data collection process commenced with a 3-month-planned approach, starting with contacting each of the selected deans by email to set up a time to conduct the interview, which consisted of a series of questions on deans' perceptions of their leadership styles and how that style may affect graduation rates. Interviews were conducted via Zoom, with no video taken to protect the identity of the participants. The recorded interviews all lasted less than an hour each. Afterward, the Temi.Com software was used to transcribe the recordings. I used the member-checking process, which involved providing the deans with a summary of the transcript and a note asking them to email back their thoughts and perspective about the accuracy of the interview data within 2 weeks if any changes were necessary. To better reflect on the true meaning of each dean's experience, if necessary, I revised their replies to each question as requested. Schilling (2006) stated that the interview process would be the correct choice to use in a case study by providing the researcher with an understanding of an event/phenomenon based on the perspective of the participants.

The next process was to review and place the collected data into defined incident categories, then code and interpret it (Richards & Hemphill, 2020). Coding and data analysis continued until data saturation occurs (Saunders et al., 2018). Glaser and Strauss (2009) explained saturation as a point of diminishing return in the data analysis (i.e., when the analysis does not uncover any new themes). I then conducted and recorded the interviews via Zoom, with no video taken to protect the identity of the participants. Next, I transcribed all recordings using Temi.com, a service which converts audio to text.

It was imperative to continue interviewing deans until the emergence of themes that permit an in-depth understanding of the perception of college deans regarding how their leadership styles affect graduation rates. If data saturation, which is when the data analysis does not yield any new information and the researcher can assume that further data collection would only lead to confirming the emerging themes (Saunders et al., 2018); does not occur by interviewing nine college deans from for-profit undergraduate learning institutions and nine deans from nonprofit higher learning institutions, the interview process continued. Therefore, it was imperative to have a few deans who volunteer to be in the research study on a stand-by list.

After the interview process, each dean who participated in the study had a chance to add comments or ask follow-up questions. Also, I reminded the participants that the recorded interview and any related information were entirely confidential, and their identities would remain confidential. I used the member-checking process, which involved providing the deans with a summary of the transcript and a note asking them to email back their thoughts about the accuracy of the interview data within a couple of weeks if any changes were necessary (Yin, 2018). To better reflect on the true meaning of the dean's experience, if necessary, I revised their replies to each question as requested. All the participants' interview transcripts were stored in a locked cabinet until the time of destruction, based on Walden University guidelines.

**Data Analysis Plan**

To provide a holistic data analysis process, I ascribed concepts to the categories, integrate abstract concepts, and categorize data to achieve a comprehensive understanding of emerging themes (Yin, 2018). A perfect analogy is Bringer et al. (2006)

metaphor of three simple notes based within a symphony, noticing, collecting, and thinking. Like a symphony, the data analysis plan was iterative, recursive, and holographic, with twirls and eddies. The researcher notices, records, shifts, and sorts codes, finally finding, analyzing, and concluding.

Data analysis is a crucial part of case study research, allowing for the research to examine complex behaviors occurring within a real-world context (Yin, 2018). In qualitative research, most of the data come from precise records of the interviewees' answers to the specific research questions (Stake, 1995). From the interview data, the researcher can identify insights, patterns, or concepts that might emerge (Yin, 2018). The coding procedure in this study might lead to an understanding of the connection between a college dean's perceived leadership styles and undergraduate graduation rates in for-profit and nonprofit higher learning institutions.

Denscombe (2014) stated that the coding process within a case study is a procedure of organizing the transpired interview into segments of text that allows the researcher to generate a detailed rendering of conceptual categories or themes for analysis. Codes constructed from the interview were a vital part of this study, by providing meaning and information (Desu, 2012), and identifying each topic described by the dean's perception of leadership in higher learning institutions. The data analysis done in this study used a three-step coding process in transcribing, examining, and categorizing the data offered by the deans in their interviews. By performing substantive coding, I could uncover, fuse, and understand the meaning of the data (Wagner et al., 2010).

Examining the transcriptions helps researchers to code and identify themes from the recorded interviews (O'Neill, 2013). The three-step coding process in transcribing, examining, and categorizing enabled me to continue probing the data to uncover trends and explore the emerging themes for each research question

Using a comparative study approach in this research study was imperative to providing in-depth insight into the perceptions of college deans in nonprofit higher learning institutions about the effect of their leadership styles on undergraduate graduation rates versus the perceptions of college deans in for-profit higher learning institutions. Bartlett and Vavrus (2017) promoted a comparative case study as a multisited fieldwork model that studies through and across sites and scales. This type of case study involves a researcher comparing the findings of several bounded cases to develop a better understanding of a phenomenon (Yin, 2018). The comparative case study design used here involves two cases, one consisting of college deans from for-profit institutions and the other consisting of college deans from nonprofit institutions.

According to Kaplan and Maxwell (2005), it was not acceptable to discard discrepant data but to label and describe the data, which helps readers elicit their conclusions. After reviewing the dean's interview, I categorized as discrepant cases all responses that did not fit into the trends or emerging themes and investigated them through the member-checking process for the possible source of differences. Yin (2018) stressed that participants must be allowed to provide focused clarity into the differences in perspective. There is a discussion of specific discrepant cases in the findings section to confirm, disconfirm, expand, or revise the research findings.

## Issues of Trustworthiness

In qualitative research, trustworthiness is the extent to which the interpretation of the data is credible. Qualitative researchers use different terms in referring to trustworthiness. Lincoln and Guba (1985) used trustworthiness, while Saldana (2015) recommended using validation. Kemparj and Chavan (2013) used four terms to specify different aspects of trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Shento (2004) restated the four criteria of trustworthiness in qualitative research, based on earlier research by Guba (1981):

- Credibility ensures the phenomenon under scrutiny is obtainable.
- Transferability requires having sufficient detail of the context of the study so that readers can apply the study findings to similar situations and settings.
- Dependability enables a future investigator to repeat the study with similar results.
- Confirmability ensures that the findings emerge from the data and not from any biases.

### Credibility

Kemparj and Chavan (2013) described credibility as having confidence in the truth of the data; they noted peer debriefing as a step to demonstrate credibility. Yin

(2018) stipulated some credibility strategies: triangulation, bracketing, thick description, and dialogic engagement strategies. Drew (2004) posited that bracketing in a research study is when the researcher separates all the behaviors and traits of the phenomenon under investigation.

I am a student at a university, this might represent a possible threat to study validity. Therefore, I ensured that I did not know any of the deans purchased from bookyourdata.com I used the member-checking process, which involves providing the deans with a summary of the transcript and a note asking them to email back their thoughts and perspective about the validity of the interview data within a couple of weeks if any changes are necessary. Also, I kept a reflective journal. This involves writing within a study journal my thoughts about how to refine my role as the researcher and refine my understanding of the participants' responses, noting and attempting to mitigate any biases that I might have regarding the study (Walls, 2015).

**Transferability**

Burkholder et al. (2016) explained transferability in qualitative research to transfer the set of research findings from one study to another. They also stated that one of the biggest challenges in transferability is having adequate details within the study so researchers can conclude how to apply the research findings to future studies. Lincoln and Guba (1985) referred to transferability as one step in establishing the trustworthiness of a research study. They described the transferability of a study being when readers can make educated decisions about how the study findings are transferable to their study or if the research findings apply to the reader's organization.

The section of the research study covering data analysis is a crucial part of transferability in the study as it contains precise records of the interviewees' answers to the specific research questions (Stake, 1995). The research process used involved a thick description of the methodology and results to guide the transferability of qualitative findings to other settings or groups (Kemparj & Chavan, 2013).

**Dependability**

Researchers describe the dependability of a qualitative study as the counterpart to reliability in quantitative research or the researcher's ability to detailed data collection and analysis (Palinkas et al., 2015)**.** Schwandt et al. (2007) postulated that a study's dependability must also give the researcher the ability to repeat the study using a logical and methodical process during data collection. Burkholder et al. (2016) suggested that dependability is one of the primary yardsticks to gauge qualitative research quality. Northcote (2012) took the opposite approach, suggesting that because of the wide-ranging nature of qualitative research, the choice of which research criteria to gauge qualitative research is an unanswerable dilemma, even for the experienced researcher.

I cross-checked data from at least two sources as one of the dependability foundations of this research study. Cross-checking data involves comparing data from multiple perspectives, or in the case of this research study, comparing the data from deans' perspectives in both private for-profit and private nonprofit higher learning institutions to search for consistencies and discrepancies in the research data. Implementing a data cross-checking process also increases confidence in the study findings.

**Confirmability**

Confirmability in qualitative studies signifies that the results are a product of the research and confirmed by others, not the result of researcher bias (Petty et al., 2012). To address issues and concerns of confirmability and reduce possible bias, I used a member-checking process, which, as described by Yin (2018), allows the interviewees to review a copy of the transcript, plus a summary document, and then provide their thoughts and perspectives.

Cross-checking the data from dean's perspective in both private for-profit and private nonprofit higher learning institution also increased the confirmability of the data, assisted in illuminating unique findings, created different avenues to understand the research phenomenon, and provided a clearer understanding of the research problem (Thurmond, 2001). Interviewing and gathering data from the perspective of higher educational deans in both for-profit institutions and nonprofit institutions provided for such data cross-checking in this study, thus reducing the participants' potential biases or misinformation. I also added to the confirmability of the study and reduced bias by keeping a reflexive journal.

**Ethical Procedures**

The use of ethical procedures must be followed during every phase of this research study, starting with the researcher not contacting any of the participants before receiving IRB approval. Then, providing all deans who agree to participate in the study with an Informed consent form by email that outlines the study, procedures, risks, and benefits, and voluntary nature of the research. Each participating dean must reply to the consent form with the words, *"I consent"* and email the form back to me before the interviewing process begins. The consent form covered ethical concerns, such as that the study was voluntary, that anyone who decides to be in the study may withdraw at any time, and that being in this study did not pose a risk to the participant's wellbeing.

As the researcher, I have completed the National Institutes of Health training course Protecting Human Research Participants (see Appendix D) to ensure that I have an in-depth understanding of the ethical procedures. This certification is one of the requirements for IRB approval. A significant part of the National Institutes of Health ethical research training course is on participant confidentiality from the beginning of the study until seven years after the study's completion.

To protect the participant's confidentiality in the study, I attached no names of the deans. I coded them as Participant 1A, 2A, so on, for deans from for-profit institutions, and 1B, 2B, so on, for deans from nonprofit institutions. I did not identify participants' institutions, just that they are from a nonprofit or a for-profit higher learning institution. Collecting just a few demographics to obviate any ethical concerns, such as

- How many years has each participant been teaching undergraduate students?
- How long has each participant been a dean at this institution?
- How long has each participant been a dean at any other school?

I stored all personal information collected during the study, the consent forms of the participants, and the transcripts of the interviews on a password-protected computer in a locked filing cabinet within my home. In compliance with IRB guidelines, I will destroy the data by shedding all written material and destroying any hard drives used in the study, after 7 years.

It was essential to develop safeguards that protect all interviews taken on audio conferencing software, by implementing security policies and protocols to control file movement and prevent unauthorized users from connecting. One such security protocol was providing unique ID numbers for each interview and each dean. Another was checking each conference service platform's privacy policy to make sure the conferencing service does not share the recorded and stored audios with advertisers or other third parties (Fabricant, 2020).

I used Zoom as my recording platform. Zoom privacy and security policies protected each recorded interview by encrypting the audio session, using various free or commercially available tools. Zoom audio cloud storage is processed and stored in Zoom's cloud after the meeting has ended; these recordings are passcode protected and available only to me. The cloud storage audio was deleted within 31 days of the meeting but will be available on a secured password-protected hard drive, located in a locked file cabinet. The hard drive will be destroyed 7 years after the completion of the research study. Zoom's privacy and security platform information is in Appendix D.

## Summary

The purpose of the qualitative, comparative case study was to explore private for-profit and nonprofit college deans' perceptions of their leadership styles and how that style affects graduation rates. My role as a researcher was to implement and execute elements of the design, such as finding and selecting the participants, administering the interview protocol, interviewing participants, and analyzing the interview data. Study participants were college deans of for-profit undergraduate learning institutions and college deans of nonprofit higher undergraduate higher learning organizations. The deans' participation was voluntary, and each participating dean replied to the consent form with the words, "I consent", then emailed the form back to me.

After the dissertation committee and Walden's IRB approved the study (approval number 01 06 21 0671442), I started data collection. The data collection process started with the use of open-ended interviews to collect the primary study data. Next, the interview data was processed to defined incident codes and then assigning them to categories. At that point in the process, all interviewed deans were provided a copy and summary of the interview transcript for member-checking. For each group, for-profit and nonprofit, I continued interviewing the deans and coding and analyzing the data until data saturation occurred. I then examined any discrepant cases that occurred. Chapter 4 consists of a review of the data collection and analysis process and a description of the research results. Chapter 5 will include an interpretation of the study findings, as well as conclusions and recommendations for further study.

# Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this qualitative, comparative case study was to explore private for-profit and nonprofit college deans' perceptions of their leadership styles and how that style affects graduation rates. In this chapter, I provide the research questions, the completed expert review, and a description of the interview settings. The next sections contain a discussion of the participant demographics, the data collection and data analysis processes, and the evidence of trustworthiness. The chapter concludes with the results of the study.

The research question for this study was: What are college deans' perceptions of their leadership style and how their leadership style affects graduation rates?

The subquestions were:

1. How do for-profit higher learning institution deans perceive their leadership styles?
2. How do nonprofit higher learning institution deans perceive their leadership styles?
3. What are the similarities and differences between how deans at for-profit and nonprofit higher learning institutions perceive their leadership styles?
4. How do for-profit higher learning institution deans perceive their leadership style affects graduation rates?
5. How do nonprofit higher learning institution deans perceive their leadership style affects graduation rates?

6. What are the similarities and differences between how for-profit and nonprofit higher learning institution deans perceive their leadership style affects graduation rates?

## Expert Review

The study included an expert review to check the validity of the interview questions. For the expert review, I asked three experts (i.e., the chairperson of my committee, the second committee member, and the third committee member assigned to the committee) to provide feedback on the following four questions regarding the interview questions:

1. Are the interview questions clear?
2. Are the interview questions appropriate for the design (comparative case study)?
3. Will the interview questions adequately answer the research question?
4. What changes, if any, would you make to the interview questions? Why?

The expert review results led to some important refinements to the original interview questions but no significant changes. The revised interview questions are in Appendix C.

## Research Setting

The participant recruitment process commenced after Walden's IRB approved the study. I purchased a list of deans and their institutions from bookyourdata.com. The list of deans is available to all paid members. Part of the process of choosing the participants was ensuring that they met the primary selection criteria. I selected deans that met the following criteria: They were academic deans in private for-profit or private nonprofit higher learning institutions in the United States.

All deans who agreed to participate in the study received a consent form in which I outlined the study, procedures, risks and benefits of participating, and the voluntary nature of the research. At this point, the data collection process commenced, starting with me contacting each of the selected deans by email to set up a time to conduct the interview and preparing the resources required to conduct the interview based on the Zoom cloud platform. I scheduled and conducted the interviews at a time convenient for each participant during a typical workday.

At the beginning of each interview, I engaged the participants in some light conversation surrounding my age and the COVID-19 pandemic. As Rubin and Rubin (2011) stated, approachable interviewing helps make the interview process more gentle, respectful, and ethical. The receptive interviewing technique involved me being not just a good conversationalist but also a good listener. There appeared to be no pressure or tension from the opening conversation that might have predisposed the participants' replies to the interview questions. However, the deans did not want to import any negative comments about their fellow deans despite my guarantee that the entire interview would strictly confidential.

## Demographics

In this study, I explored how deans of for-profit and not-for-profit universities conceptualize their leadership style within the specific organizational contexts of students completing college. The population for this study consisted of college deans of private for-profit undergraduate learning institutions and college deans of private nonprofit undergraduate higher learning organizations. These deans are responsible for setting academic guidelines and policies, academic appointments, faculty development, and other administration duties (CITE).

I interviewed 18 participants, all of whom met the qualifications to participate, nine were deans from for-profit private higher learning schools and nine were deans from a few nonprofit private higher learning schools. To protect the privacy and confidentiality of the participants, I coded their names for study purposes: Participant FP1, FP2, and so forth for deans from for-profit institutions, and NP1, NP2, and so forth for deans from nonprofit institutions. Table 1 displays participant demographic information.

**Table 1**

*Summary of Participant Demographics*

| Participant | Present Position | Years in Leadership (Dean) | Years in Higher Education |
|---|---|---|---|
| For-profit institutions | | | |
| FP1 | Dean | 9 | 17 |
| FP2 | Dean | 7 | 11 |
| FP3 | Dean | 8 | 25 |
| FP4 | Dean | 6 | 9 |
| FP5 | Dean | 10 | 19 |
| FP6 | Dean | 20 | 25 |
| FP7 | Asst. Dean | 3 | 11 |
| FP8 | Dean | 11 | 22 |
| FP9 | Dean | 3 | 26 |
| Nonprofit institutions | | | |
| NP1 | Dean | 6 | 30 |
| NP2 | Dean | 3 | 05 |
| NP3 | Dean Emeritus | 10 | 19 |
| NP4 | Dean | 2 | 12 |
| NP5 | Dean | 8 | 27 |
| NP6 | Dean | 5 | 17 |
| NP7 | Dean | 3 | 19 |
| NP8 | Dean | 7 | 26 |
| NP9 | Dean | 7 | 23 |

## Data Collection

After Walden University's IRB and my dissertation committee approved the study, data collection commenced. I recruited, using a purposeful sample strategy, and interviewed nine deans from a few, for-profit, private higher learning schools and nine deans from a few, nonprofit, private higher learning schools. Six participants were women and 12 were men. Fifteen are working deans, two are emeritus (i.e., retired) deans, and one is an associate dean.

I sent a personal introductory email to deans from a list purchased from bookyourdata.com. Twenty deans responded, agreeing to be participants in the study, and they were sent a follow-up email, including a consent form in which I outlined the study, procedures, risks and benefits of participation, and the voluntary nature of the research. Eighteen deans provided their informed consent by replying, “I consent” to the email; two deans did not reply to the consent form email or a follow-up email. The next step entailed scheduling the individual interviews via email. After confirming a date and time with the participants, I sent them a calendar invitation, including a note stating that 1 hour before the scheduled meeting they would receive an email with a Zoom link for the interview.

All the interviews lasted less than an hour, with many of the interviews lasting less than 45 minutes. Afterward, I used the Temi.com software to transcribe the recordings. I then used the member-checking process, which involved providing the deans with a summary of the transcript and a note asking them to email back their thoughts and perspective about the validity of the interview data within 2 weeks if any changes were necessary. As Yin (2018) described, member checking allows the interviewees to provide their thoughts and perspective on the data collected in the interview.

I conducted all 18 interviews on the Zoom cloud platform. Zoom (2021) privacy and security policies protected each video and recorded interview by encrypting the session using various free or commercially available tools. Zoom processed and stored a recording of each interview in their cloud after the meeting had ended; these recordings are passcode protected and available only to me. The Zoom Privacy and Security Policies (see Appendix D) stated that embedded into the audio is an inaudible watermark of the user's personal information.

I planned on using the NVivo 12 software for organizing the unstructured interview data. Instead, I used paper, pen, and colors to uncover trends and explore the emerging themes for the research question and subquestions. Rubin and Rubin (2011) stated that there is no substitute for how the researcher makes sense of the data in qualitative analysis. In one of the first interviews, I also forgot to record the session. However, because I took detailed notes as we worked through the questions, this did not present a problem in constructing the interview summary or in data analysis.

One surprising circumstance I encountered in the interview process involved the interview recordings. At the beginning of each interview, I asked the participant if they were comfortable with my audio recording the interview. All 18 deans stated that they were comfortable with me audio recording the interview, which allowed me to pay more attention to picking up on any nonverbal cues exhibited by the participants during the interviews.

## Data Analysis

Because the goal of the study was to explore internal states, such as the opinion, values, and symbolic constructs of deans, a qualitative approach was necessary (see Stake, 1995). I employed a qualitative, comparative case study design. This approach was imperative for developing in-depth insights into the perceptions of college deans in nonprofit higher learning institutions about the effect of their leadership styles on undergraduate graduation rates versus the perceptions of college deans in for-profit higher learning institutions.

The data analysis process for this qualitative study consisted of six steps:

1. Conduct and record the first interview with a dean; transcribe the interview; member check; then analyze the interview transcript; and code each topic described by the dean, identifying potential themes that emerged from the interview for two subquestions:
   a. How does the dean perceive their leadership style?
   b. How does the dean perceive their leadership style affects graduation rates?
2. Interview the second dean; transcribe the interview; member check; analyze the transcript; and code each topic described by the dean, identifying potential themes. Compare the potential themes from the second interview with the potential themes from the first interview for both subquestions, creating a tentative list of potential themes from the transcripts from both interviews.
3. Interview the third dean; transcribe the interview; member check; analyze the transcript; and code each topic described by the dean, identifying potential themes. Compare the potential themes identified from the third interview with

the first two interviews, creating a new composite of the potential themes for each subquestion based on the data for the three interviews.

4. Continue the interviewing, member checking, and analysis cycle with the deans until each new interview does not yield any new themes (i.e., data saturation), producing a prioritized list of themes that emerged for each of the subquestions for the deans from the first type of learning institution.
5. Repeat the four data analysis steps for the deans from the second type of higher learning institution interviewed until data saturation occurs (i.e., each new interview does not yield any new major themes).
6. After completing all the interviews with deans from both for-profit and nonprofit institutions, compare the themes that emerged from the data analysis for each group (i.e., for-profit versus nonprofit) for the research questions and subquestions.

In a qualitative research study, discrepancies in the participant’s interviews may occur. According to Kaplan and Maxwell (2005), it is not acceptable to discard discrepant data, so it must be labeled and described, which helps readers draw their own conclusions. The deans’ interviews in the study did not present any clear cases of discrepancy.

## Evidence of Trustworthiness

Providing evidence of trustworthiness is demonstrating that the interpretation of the data is credible (CITE). Consequently, I used all the methods described in Chapter 3 to ensure the trustworthiness of the study data. No deviation or adjustments to the research plan occurred that might have affected the trustworthiness of the study.

**Credibility**

To establish the credibility of this study, I used the member-checking process, which involved providing the deans with a summary of the transcript for review. The member-checking email to the deans included a note asking them to email back their thoughts and perspective about the validity of the interview data if any changes were necessary. Four participants responded back with minor corrections to their transcript summaries, and one participant requested that I not mention her current dean assignment.

I kept a reflective journal describing my own experiences, feelings, and biases. This journal refined my understanding of the participants' responses, helping me to note and attempt to mitigate any biases that I had surrounding the study. I conducted an expert review to check the credibility of the interview questions for the proposed study. The expert review results led to some important refinements to the original interview questions in Appendix A, but no significant changes. Because I am a student at Walden University, I ensured that I did not know any of the deans whose contact information I purchased from bookyourdata.com.

**Transferability**

Ensuring transferability for this study entailed having adequate details within the study so researchers can conclude how to apply the research findings to future studies (Burkholder et al., 2016). Providing adequate details of the issues and circumstances within the present study strengthens the research transferability to other researchers. The details of the issues can also play a role in the research findings being a catalyst for future research. To support transferability further, I developed and expanded the understanding of the data by examining and describing discrepant cases. To remain impartial, I also used a research journal to reflect on my own experiences.

**Dependability**

Schwandt et al. (2007) postulated that a study's dependability depends on the ability of other researchers to repeat the study using a logical and methodical process during data collection. To enhance the study's dependability, I cross-checked data from two sources as one of the foundations of this research study. I compared and contrasted data from the deans' perspective in private for-profit and private nonprofit higher learning institutions to search for consistencies and discrepancies in the research data.

Houghton et al. (2013) stated that to ensure the dependability of a research study, the researcher must use the identical method for processing and analyzing data.
I audio recorded 17 of the interviews and took abundant notes on the one interview where the recording device did not work. I transcribed all of the interviews using the same protocol and followed the same method to analyze all the interviews.

**Confirmability**

To address the confirmability of the study, I cross-checked the data from the dean's perspective in both private for-profit and private nonprofit higher learning institutions, which helped to illuminate unique findings and created different avenues to understand the research phenomenon (Thurmond, 2001). I also assured the confirmability of the research by keeping a reflective journal. This involved writing a journal describing my own experiences, feelings, and biases. The journal refined my understanding of the participants' responses, noting and attempting to mitigate any biases surrounding the study.

## Study Results

The purpose of this qualitative comparative case study was to explore private for-profit and nonprofit college deans' perception of their leadership styles and how that style affects graduation rates. The data collection process consisted of interviews with nine deans from a few for-profit private higher learning schools, noted in the research as FP1-FP9, and nine deans from a few nonprofit private higher learning institutions, noted in the research as NP1-NP9. Six were women and 12 were men. Fifteen are working deans, two are emeritus (retired) deans, and one is an associate dean. For each group, for-profit and nonprofit, I continued interviewing the deans and coding and analyzing the data until data saturation occurred.

Tables 2 through 5 contain themes identified from a constant comparative analysis of the data provided by each group of deans (i.e., for-profit vs. nonprofit). I included evidence from the transcripts of the interviews to support the findings. In response to Subquestion 1, each of the nine for-profit deans who participated in the study stated how they perceive their leadership style. From the interview transcripts, I developed 29 potential themes, only seven of which resonated with over 50% of the participants. The top five themes centered around the deans' interactions with the school faculty. Eighty-eight percent of the deans from for-profit schools noted Theme 1, motivate faculty individually. FP5 stated that her focus was to motivate each faculty member individually, encourage their intellectual needs, and inspire them. FP9, a dean from a for-profit school, saw his role as being more removed from direct student interaction and more focused on faculty interaction and motivation. Seventy-eight percent of the deans articulated Theme 2, capitalizing on faculty strengths. FP3 expressed that he wanted to understand what academic strength his faculty members possess, make sure they are using those assets, and guide them based on their potential. Dean FP6 stated that he would like to think the faculty finds him very respectful of their individual gift's strengths and needs.

**Table 2**

*For-Profit Higher Learning Institution Deans' Perceived Leadership Styles*

| Themes | Participants | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| Motivate faculty individually | 8 | 88% |
| Capitalize on faculty strengths | 7 | 78% |
| Build strong relationships with faculty | 7 | 78% |
| Empower adjuncts to be passionate | 7 | 78% |
| Collaborate with faculty | 7 | 78% |
| Involve faculty and students in curriculum | 6 | 67% |
| Create a student-centered environment | 5 | 56% |

Seventy-eight percent of the for-profit deans touched on the Themes 3, 4, and 5, build strong relationships with faculty, empower adjuncts to be passionate, collaborate with faculty. FP1 believed that to keep faculty sharp, they must present at a conference, publish a paper, serve on a committee, or do anything that shows they are undertaking professional development. FP2 conceptualized his views on being supportive and collaborating with faculty. He expounded that as the leader, he understands what academic strengths his people possess and makes sure they are using them. FP3 communicated that empowering his adjuncts to have the tools they need to be passionate about what they are doing is of prime importance.

Sixty-seven percent of the deans interviewed from for profit institutions articulated Theme 6, involving faculty and students in the curriculum. FP3 suggested that as the leader, it is essential to incorporate both students and faculty ideas into the curriculum; thereby, they have more ownership of the program. FP7 noted how strongly she believed students are as much a part of building the curriculum as the faculty are in delivering it.

Fifty-six percent of the deans interviewed noted Theme 7, creating a student-centered environment. FP4 expressed that he tried to create an environment concentrated on the student, where his assistant deans and faculty can create the university's vision, but that this environment cannot be top-down. A quote by FP6 best sums up this theme; "I think there's this combination of being supportive while still being directional in the sense of inviting students into a vision and the mission and motivating them around that mission." Summarizing the for-profit institutional deans' perceptions of their leadership style, the themes are about engaging the faculty and students in the educational process. The viewpoints of the deans reflect traits of a transformational leader.

**Table 3**

*Nonprofit Higher Learning Institution Deans' Perceived Leadership Styles*

| Themes | Participants | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| Adopt a democratic leadership style | 8 | 88% |
| Collaborate with faculty and students | 6 | 67% |
| Advocate for faculty | 6 | 67% |
| Advocate for the students | 6 | 67% |
| Build trust with faculty | 6 | 67% |
| Share governance with faculty and staff | 6 | 67% |
| Have an open-door policy with faculty | 5 | 56% |
| Connect directly with students | 5 | 56% |

In response to subquestion 2, each of the nine nonprofit higher learning institution deans who participated in the study stated how they perceive their leadership style. Based on constant comparative analysis of the deans' interview transcripts, 21 potential themes emerged, of which only eight resonated with over 50% of the participants (see Table 3). The latter were the themes. Eighty-eight percent of the deans from nonprofit schools mentioned Theme 1, a democratic leadership style. Participant NP1 answered that her leadership style is not to micromanage or be a dictator but to have a more democratic leadership style in which members of the faculty take a more participative role in the decision-making process. NP7 explained her approach to giving suggestions to students and faculty as a democratic style. Sixty-seven percent of the deans mentioned Theme 2, collaboration with faculty and students. NP1 expressed how important it is to build relationships with the students. NP2 said, "I tend to be, I would say, much more collaborative. I try to build consensus where I can," to create a supportive environment.

Up to 67% of the deans identified Theme 3, advocating for faculty. NP8 stated that his role is to motivate and advocate for faculty members, to provide them what is necessary to be successful in their role. NP2 sees himself as a faculty advocate, the megaphone for the faculty. In the same vein, 67% of the deans mentioned Theme 4, advocating for the students. NP2 said that his biggest goal is to advocate for the students so that they feel what they are doing is meaningful. NP9 said that, unfortunately, sometimes he could not do anything more than advocate for the student. Sixty-seven percent of the deans identified Theme 5, building trust with faculty. NP9 said that she had built a talented team she can trust, and they trust her. NP1 stated that she makes a difference by building trust and being supportive of faculty.

Sixty-seven percent of the deans interviewed touched on Theme 6, share governance with faculty and staff. NP1 explained that her college has a program called shared governance, in which the faculty chair different standing committees. Fifty-six percent of the deans articulated Theme 7, having an open-door policy with faculty. For example, dean NP7 indicated how important it is for him to have an open-door policy and support his teachers. This type of policy also affects the students, instructors, and the institution. Fifty-six percent of the deans expressed Theme 8, connect directly with students. NP1 affirmed that she could make a difference for students by putting them at the center of everything she does. In summary, over 50% of the deans in nonprofit institutions expressed their leadership style as building trust, collaborating, advocating, and sharing governance with faculty. At the same time, most deans stated that they try to support and connect with their students. The themes articulated by the deans are all traits of a transformational leader.

Table 4 shows the themes from subquestion 3 on how deans from for-profit institutions perceive their leadership style affects graduation rates. Each of the nine deans who participated in the study stated how they perceive their leadership style affects graduation rates. From the dean's interview transcript, I developed 24 potential themes, of which only nine resonated with over 50% of the participants. Eighty-eight percent of the deans mentioned Theme 1, building faculty relationships. In an animated voice, FP6 explained that supporting, inspiring, and including the faculty in the whole educational process is reflective in how they interact with the students and helps the students finish school. FP2 described his style of improving graduation rates as having faculty and himself build relationships with students. He expressed that the faculty's relationships with students and his relationship with the faculty help facilitate the students' success.

Eighty-eight percent of the deans interviewed from for profit institutions articulated Theme 2, inspire and include faculty in the educational process. This theme is reflected in FP1's words:

> My philosophy is pushed down through my administrative team, which then trickles to the faculty---and I think that always comes out on the students. So, if the students are working 100% with their faculty, they are always successful. I

**Table 4**

*For-Profit Deans' Perceptions of How Their Leadership Style Affects Graduation Rates*

| Themes | Participants | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| Build faculty relationships | 8 | 88% |
| Inspire and include faculty in the educational process | 8 | 88% |
| Help every faculty member achieve a higher teaching level | 7 | 78% |
| Improve students' success with a positive leadership style | 7 | 78% |
| Provide professors with educational tools to help students finish | 6 | 67% |
| Develop individualized educational plans with faculty to improve graduation rates | 6 | 67% |
| Do everything by the book | 5 | 56% |
| Demand that faculty build relationships with students | 5 | 56% |
| Motivate students to earn required credits for certification | 5 | 56% |

> mean, we have been able to take very extreme cases and get them across the stage.

FP2 stated that one of the main goals of her college was to increase graduation rates. Her style was to motivate each faculty member individually, encourage their intellectual needs, and inspire them to help students.

FP4 summed up Theme 3, helping every faculty member achieve a higher teaching level, as follows: “to achieve a higher graduation rate, a dean must constantly challenge the faculty, engage them in the curriculum, and help incorporate their ideas into the material.” During the interview, FP8 described her leadership style by stating that she is a transactional leader who offers performance rewards, and monitors and facilitates the faculty to achieve a higher professional level. Seventy-eight percent of the deans interviewed noted Theme 4, improve students’ success with a positive leadership style. FP1 referred to leadership either from the dean or the faculty as coaching and having a positive mindset. She categorized her leadership skills as a servant-type leader with a mother philosophy. FP6 conceptualized his positive leadership style as offering support to the faculty. Offering this support has helped develop a pool of faculty who have a mindset of supporting the students and helping them graduate.

Sixty-seven percent of the deans resonated with Themes 5 and 6, provide professors with the educational tools to help students finish and develop individualized educational plans with faculty to improve graduation rates. Both themes revolve around educational skills that a dean must have and use to help the students graduate. According to FP7, as a dean he is a mentor for new professors as they might not necessarily know how to relate their material to students. One of his primary duties is to help the professors with the curriculum and help guide them through the teaching process. For instance, FP7 stated, “I will observe my faculty teaching, making sure that they are able to connect with the students.” FP1 expressed that as a leader he must be able to separate the business aspect of the school from the educational aspect. He believes that if the dean and faculty show the students they care about them, retention and graduation numbers increase.

Fifty-six percent of the deans from for-profit schools mentioned Themes 7, 8, and 9, building relationships between the student and the faculty, motivating the students, and following the administrative guidelines. FP5 stated that her main focus was to motivate each faculty member individually, encourage their intellectual needs, and inspire them. FP3 said that the administration and schools' core values of diversity inclusion, respect, social justice, and social advocacy play a big part in his leadership philosophy because all these programs deal with student relationships. FP1 mentioned that he pushes down his leadership philosophy through the administrative team. The team learns from his guidelines and agrees with how he approaches things. In his opinion, this leadership approach always helps the students in their educational pursuits.

In summary, the themes in Table 4 encompass how deans from for-profit institutions perceive their leadership style affects graduation rates. Nine themes resounded with over 50% of the participants, and the top eight themes (by percentage) centered around the faculty and leadership. A large percentage of the nine deans interviewed mentioned building faculty relationships, inspiring faculty, helping faculty members achieve a higher teaching level, and providing faculty a positive leadership environment as critical traits in improving graduation rates. FP6 expressed that supporting, inspiring, and including the faculty in the whole educational process affects how they interact with the students, thereby helping them graduate.

Table 5 displays the themes for subquestion 4 on how deans from nonprofit institutions perceive their leadership style affects graduation rates. Each of the nine nonprofit deans who participated in the study stated how they perceive their leadership style affects graduation rates. From the dean's interview transcript, I developed 30 potential themes, only eight of which resonated with 50% or more of the participants. For example, 100% of the deans from nonprofit schools mentioned Theme 1, invest faculty in the program. NP8 expressed that investing in her faculty starts with supporting what faculty members need to be successful in helping students achieve their academic endeavors. NP2 felt the more he invests the faculty and staff in the program, the more their sense of satisfaction in the job spills into their dealings with the students.

**Table 5**

*Nonprofit Deans' Perceptions of How Their Leadership Style Affects Graduation Rates*

| Themes | Participants | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| Invest faculty in the program | 9 | 100% |
| Give faculty academic freedom | 8 | 88% |
| Communicate with faculty | 7 | 78% |
| Have a transparent leadership style | 7 | 78% |
| Focus leadership on faculty and students | 7 | 78% |
| Build good support systems into the school | 5 | 56% |
| Delegate authority to the faculty | 5 | 56% |
| Ensure students' voices are heard | 5 | 56% |

Eighty-eight percent of the deans identified Theme 2, giving faculty academic freedom. NP5 conveyed that his job consists of supporting his faculty and providing them enough academic leeway to facilitate student success. NP4 articulated that it was imperative to support faculties' educational endeavors, which may affect graduation rates. Seventy-eight percent of the deans expounded on Theme 3, communicating with faculty. NP3 suggested that communication with his staff improves when they understand each other, and a two-way communication channel helps the faculty find their passion and pathway. NP2 said that he tries to communicate with the students to make them feel as if they are part of the system and part of the educational process.

Seventy-eight percent of the deans interviewed noted Theme 4, having a transparent leadership. NP2 answered that "being transparent and communicating with faculty and students as much as possible, had a positive effect on completion rates because students feel like we care about them, we listen to them." NP5 perceived that to help students succeed in their educational experience, he needed to give the faculty some clear expectations, then give them their heads, and let them do their jobs. Seventy-eight percent of the deans expressed Theme 5, focus leadership on faculty and students. NP2 stated that as a leader it was essential to invest the faculty with a sense of community and focus on students to make them feel like they are part of the process and community. NP1 felt that she did not just concentrate on the business and financial side of the institution but focused on leading the faculty and students throughout the whole educational experience.

Fifty-six percent of the deans articulated Theme 6, building a good support system into the school. A prime example is what NP8 expressed, which is that in many respects his leadership influence is indirect. He creates a context or environment that supports his faculty members in helping students achieving their academic endeavors. Continuing in this same vein of thought, 56% of the deans resonated with Theme 7 (delegate authority to the faculty) and Theme 8 (ensure students' voices are heard). NP4 noted that as a leader she must develop her faculty into an engaging and powerful academic force working in student support services and sponsoring student groups. NP2 best summed up these two themes by expressing that the more he invests the faculty and staff in the program, the more their sense of satisfaction in their job spills over into their dealings with students. In conclusion, the deans in nonprofit institutions expounded on specific themes surrounding their leadership style affecting graduation rates. These themes consisted of investing and communicating with faculty and students. The deans also stated that letting faculty have the freedom to help students graduate and being a focused, transparent leader, which is part of their leadership style, affects graduation rates.

**Comparison of Themes of Deans from Nonprofit Institutions and Deans from For-profit Institutions**

After completing all the analyses of the interview data, I compared the findings from the data analysis of how deans of for-profit institutions and deans of nonprofit institutions perceived their leadership styles (see Table 6). I also compared the findings from the data analysis of how the deans perceive their leadership style affects graduation rates (see Table 7). Ryan (2018) argued that the case study interview and investigative process provides an opportunity for such an integrated analysis of data to enable an in-depth clarification of the findings.

Comparing the themes about leadership styles that resonated with deans from for-profit institutions to those of deans from nonprofit institutions (see Table 6) showed an exceptionally high level of common ground. For example, NP8 stated that his role is to motivate and advocate for faculty members and provide them with what is necessary to succeed in their role. Similarly, FP5 stated that her focus was to motivate each faculty member individually, encourage their intellectual needs, and inspire them. NP2 said that his biggest goal is to help the students and faculty feel like what they are doing is meaningful, while FP7 stated that he helps his faculty connect with the students.

**Table 6**

*Comparison of For-Profit and Nonprofit Deans' Perceived Leadership Styles*

| Themes/Deans of For-profit Schools | Themes/Deans of Nonprofit Schools |
|---|---|
| Motivate faculty individually | adopt a democratic leadership style |
| Capitalize on faculty strengths | Collaborate with faculty and students |
| Build strong relationships with faculty | Advocate for faculty |
| Empower adjuncts to be passionate | Advocate for the students |
| Collaborate with faculty | Build trust with faculty |
| Involve faculty and students in curriculum | Share governance with faculty and staff |
| | Have an open-door policy with faculty |
| Create a student-centered environment | Connect directly with students |

Table 7, which is a comparison of the themes stated by deans from for-profit institutions and deans from nonprofit institutions about their perceptions of how their leadership style affects graduation rates, shows a foundation built on transformational leadership theory. For example, NP8 expressed that investing in her faculty starts with supporting what faculty members need to be successful in helping students achieve their academic endeavors. While FP6 explained that supporting, inspiring, and including the faculty in the whole educational process is reflective of how they interact with the students and, in turn, helps the students finish school. Both NP5 and FP4 conveyed that to increase graduation rates, they must support and challenge the faculty to engage in the curriculum, incorporate their ideas into the material, and give them enough academic leeway to facilitate student success.

**Table 7**

*Comparison of For-Profit and Nonprofit Deans' Perceptions of How Their Leadership Style Affects Graduation Rates*

| Themes/Deans of For-profit Schools | Themes/Deans of Nonprofit Schools |
|---|---|
| Build faculty relationships | Invest faculty in the program |
| Inspire and include faculty in the educational process | Give faculty academic freedom |
| Help every faculty member achieve a higher teaching level | Communicate with faculty |
| Improve students' success with a positive leaderships style | Have a transparent leadership style |
| Provide professors with educational tools to help students finish | Focus leadership on faculty and students |
| Develop individualized educational plan with faculty to improve graduation rates | Build good support systems into the school |
| Do everything by the book | Delegate authority to the faculty |
| Demand that faculty build relationships with students | Ensure students' voices are heard |

## Summary

The purpose of this qualitative comparative case study was to explore private for-profit and nonprofit college deans' perceptions of their leadership styles and how that style affects graduation rates. Following the interview procedures outlined in Chapter 3, the participants from for-profit and nonprofit schools provided sufficient data relating to the research question. The fundamentals of Chapter 4 included the participant demographics, the data collection and data analysis processes, and the evidence of trustworthiness. The chapter concluded with the study results, which covered the central research question and two supporting subquestions for both groups, for-profit and nonprofit deans, included in the study.

This study showed there are many similarities between the leadership dynamics of deans from nonprofit schools and deans from for-profit schools. The themes revealed that both deans from for-profit and nonprofit institutions have a largely positive view of leadership. Most deans communicated that their leadership style consisted of being trustworthy, trusting, easily accessible, relatively hands-off, and empathetic towards faculty and students, reflective of the transformational leadership theory.

Also, the study's findings reflect many similarities between how the deans from nonprofit schools and deans from for-profit schools perceive their leadership style affects graduation rates. Most deans expressed that to increase graduation rates, they must communicate with faculty and invest in and inspire faculty while presenting a transparent and positive leadership style to students. Chapter 5 includes further discussion of the interpretation of these findings, limitations of the study, recommendations for future research, and implications for positive social change.

# Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The graduation rate for undergraduate students in for-profit higher learning institutions is 23%, compared to 59% for public institutions and 66% for private nonprofit institutions (McFarland et al., 2017; Shapiro & Tang, 2019). Several for-profit online schools have a 6-year graduation rate of 11% or below (The Education Trust, 2019).

The purpose of this qualitative, comparative case study was to explore private for-profit and nonprofit college deans' perceptions of their leadership styles and how that style affects graduation rates. Use of the comparative case study approach allowed me to develop in-depth insights into the perceptions of college deans in for-profit higher learning institutions about the effect of their leadership styles on undergraduate graduation rates versus the perceptions of college deans in nonprofit higher learning institutions. The data collection process included in-depth interviews with nine deans from a few, for-profit, private schools and nine deans from a few, nonprofit, private schools.

The findings in Chapter 4 showed many similarities between the leadership dynamics of deans from nonprofit schools and deans from for-profit schools. The findings also reflected parallels between how the deans from for-profit and nonprofit schools perceive their leadership style affects graduation rates. Chapter 5 includes the interpretation of findings, limitations of this study, recommendations for future research, and social change and practice implications.

## Interpretation of Findings

To interpret the findings of this study, I took into consideration the central research question, which focused on both deans from nonprofit institutions and deans from for-profit institutions: What are college deans' perceptions of their leadership style and how does their leadership style affect graduation rates? The results showed an exceptionally high level of common ground between the leadership dynamics of deans from nonprofit schools and deans from for-profit schools. The findings of how deans from nonprofit schools and for-profit schools perceive their leadership style affects graduation rates displays a foundation built on the transformational leadership theory.

### Deans from Nonprofit Higher Learning Institutions

As shown in Table 3, over 80% of the deans from nonprofit institutions perceived their leadership style as democratic. Over 60% of the deans perceive their leadership style as involving collaboration, exhibiting trust, sharing governance, and advocating for students and faculty—all characteristics of a transformation leadership style. Elrehail et al. (2018) tried to address the three dimensions to institutional leadership, teamwork, motivation, and collaboration with employees, all of which are characteristics of a transformational leadership style. Avila (2016) undertook a mixed-method study based on Bass's TLSI with the results showing that nonprofit institutions whose deans possessed higher scores in team-building skills, personal/interpersonal skills, and character/integrity (i.e., a transformational leadership style) had higher undergraduate graduation rates.

As illustrated in Table 5, over 75% of the deans from nonprofit schools perceive that investing faculty in the program; giving them academic freedom; communicating with them effectively; and having a focused, transparent leadership style affects graduation rates. Avila's (2016) research demonstrated that a positive relationship between deans and transformational leadership style increased student graduation rates.

**Deans from For-Profit Higher Learning Institutions**

Deans are instrumental to higher learning institutions and the backbone for academic leadership (Zacher & Bal, 2012). The present-day position of dean in for-profit higher learning institutions includes the responsibility of managerial and entrepreneurial tasks. They must lead the members of the institution and develop the strategic competencies to cultivate solutions to problems within the school (Anderson, 2019; Avila, 2016).

Jones (2011) stated that while exercising the necessary skills to meet the challenges of an administrative and academic position, the dean of a for-profit institution must always assume a leadership position. Sims and Quatro (2015) pointed out that one of the primary duties for deans is to accept and define their leadership roles. Jones suggested that regardless of where the dean's position falls in the academic hierarchy, either on a rotational basis or appointed from inside or outside the university, they are first and foremost academic leaders. A crucial task for all deans is to possess the necessary skills that will allow them to be effective in a leadership position (Arntzen, 2016).

As shown in Table 2, 70% of the deans interviewed in for-profit institutions stressed that their leadership traits included motivating faculty, capitalizing on faculty strengths, collaborating, building relationships, and empowering faculty. All five of these traits embrace the concepts put forth for a transformational leader. Transformational leaders respect and appreciate their relationship with followers and encourage them to be more creative and innovative in problem solving, all while addressing their followers' need for personal growth, achievement, and empowerment (Anderson & Sun, 2017; Asrar-ul-Haq & Kuchinke, 2016; Bass, 1997).

The themes shared by deans from for-profit institutions shown in Table 4 relate to how they perceive their leadership style affects graduation rates. Over 50% of the deans perceived that they have a transformation type leadership that provided a positive leadership environment for improving graduation rates. A large percentage of the 18 deans interviewed mentioned building faculty relationships, inspiring faculty, helping faculty members achieve a higher teaching level, and providing faculty with a positive leadership environment. Bass and Riggio (2006) stated that the transformational leadership theory is a process by which leaders interact with others and that the leader can use to create a stable relationship, resulting in increased motivation, both intrinsic and extrinsic, in followers (Avolio & Bass, 1999; Bass, 1995; Bass & Riggio, 2006).

**Comparison of Leadership Themes**

I compared data from deans in private for-profit and private nonprofit higher learning institutions to look for similarities and differences. I accomplished this process by comparing the themes about leadership styles that resonated with deans from nonprofit institutions and deans from for-profit institutions, and the results showed an exceptionally high level of common ground. As shown in Table 6 in Chapter 4, all eight themes that resonated with over 50% of the participants related to behaviors of a transformational leader. Most deans stated recurring phrases, such as motivating faculty, collaborating with faculty, building strong relationships with faculty, advocating for faculty and students, empowering and building trust with faculty, and sharing governance.

**Comparison of How Leadership Style Affects Graduation Rates Themes**

Burns (1978) stated that leaders who engage in an interaction with followers take them to a higher motivational plane and a more significant achievement level. Bass (1995) built on Burn's theory and conceptualized the four components of transformational leadership: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individual consideration. Table 7 in Chapter 4, in which I compared the themes about how deans' leadership style affects graduation rates, shows an analogous foundation built on the transformational leadership theory for deans from both for-profit and nonprofit institutions. Over 50% of the deans from for-profit and nonprofit schools expressed that investing in faculty, building relationships, inspiring a communicating with faculty, and delegating authority to the staff increased students' graduation rates.

The study findings suggest that there is little difference between how for-profit and nonprofit higher learning institution deans perceive their leadership style and the effect of their leadership style' on graduation rates. Therefore, the discrepancy in the graduation rates between for-profit and nonprofit undergraduate schools may not be related to the difference in leadership styles of for-profit and nonprofit leaders in higher education.

## Limitations of the Study

The limitations of this study were:

- According to Ryan (2013), interviewing participants could have led to inconsistencies in the responses; therefore, I used member checking to confirm their responses to reduce this threat to the validity of the study data.
- Another threat to cogency was due to potential researcher bias because I am currently a student of a higher education institution. I mitigated this threat by ensuring that I did not know any of the participants and keeping a reflexive journal.
- Another limitation was that with a small sample size, the participants might not represent the population of deans in for-profit and nonprofit higher learning institutions.
- An additional limitation of this study included the data collection method of in-depth interviews. Some participants may have answered my questions on leadership style and how it might affect graduation rates with a preplanned response. Deans may have answered the question based on what they believed fit the philosophy of the provost and the institution.

- A further limitation might have resulted from selecting the deans at random from for-profit and nonprofit higher learning institutions without determining the graduation rates for the institutions. As a result, the graduation rates for the for-profit schools and nonprofit schools included in the study might have been similar.

**Recommendations**

As a qualitative, comparative case study, the objective of this research was to explore private for-profit and nonprofit college deans' perceptions of their leadership styles and how that style affects graduation rates. The study findings suggest that there is little difference between how for-profit and nonprofit higher learning institution deans perceive their leadership style and perceive the effect of their leadership style on graduation rates. The findings that the deans who participated exhibited a transformational leadership style, could lead to positive social change. For example, for-profit and nonprofit educational institutions might use the findings to help create leadership training programs focused on developing a transformational leadership style to help deans with other leadership styles, such as transactional or autocratic, lead in ways that improve undergraduate graduation rates.

My recommendations for future research include conducting a qualitative study with former students to determine what leadership skills they perceive college deans utilized and how the dean's leadership style affected undergraduate graduation rates. Or conducting a study using the same parameters as this study but with undergraduate faculty as participants to determine their perceptions of their leadership style and how it affects graduation rates. I also recommend undertaking a research study using a multicase study approach and expanding the sample of college deans to include schools from public institutions in addition to for-profit and nonprofit ones. Alternatively, a comparative case study of deans from private, for-profit higher learning institutions demonstrating a high graduation rate level versus deans from private, for-profit higher learning institutions demonstrating a low graduation rate level could be conducted to ascertain the deans' perceived leadership styles and the perceived effect on undergraduate graduation rates. Using the extended research parameters in conjunction with the results of this study would provide a more comprehensive analysis of the deans' perceptions of their leadership style and its effect on undergraduate graduation rates.

Some of the deans responded during the interview that it was difficult to associate how and in what way their leadership style affects graduation rates. One recommendation to address this issue is to expand the structure of the study by introducing other variables that might address the discrepancies in graduation rates between for-profit schools and nonprofit schools, such as including data about students' financial income, race, precollege background, and high school GPA into the study's framework.

## Implications

In this section, I explore the implications of the study for social change, theory, and practice. The general problem was that the graduation rate for undergraduate students in for-profit higher learning institutions is 23%, compared to 59% for public institutions and 66% for private nonprofit institutions (see McFarland et al., 2017; Shapiro & Tang, 2019). The specific problem was that college deans' leadership styles may contribute to the difference in graduation rates between for-profit and not-for-profit institutions. There is a gap in the academic knowledge surrounding the leadership characteristics of deans within for-profit educational institutions and how their leadership skills may influence student retention (Avila, 2016; Sypawka et al., 2010).

The results showed many similarities between the leadership dynamics of deans from nonprofit schools and deans from for-profit schools. The themes revealed that both deans from for-profit and nonprofit institutions have a largely positive view of leadership. Most deans communicated that their leadership style consisted of trustworthiness; being trusting, easily accessible, and relatively hands-off; and displaying empathy towards faculty and students. All these traits are reflective of the transformational leadership theory. The study's findings also encompass how the deans from for-profit and nonprofit schools perceive their leadership style affects graduation rates reflected many similarities of the transformational leadership theory. Most deans expressed that they must communicate with faculty to increase graduation rates and invest in and inspire faculty while presenting a transparent and positive leadership style to students.

## Implications for Social Change

This study's implications for social change stem from the need to increase U.S. college graduation rates in response to global changes (De Freitas et al., 2015). Carnevale and Rose's (2011) study showed that there would be a need for 20 million new college-educated people in the workforce by 2025. The need to increase college graduates is creating operational pressures on for-profit higher learning institutions to improve student graduation rates (De Freitas et al., 2015). The study results demonstrated that the leadership styles of deans from nonprofit for-profit institutions and deans from nonprofit institutions reflect many of the characteristics of transformational leadership theory. Jones and Rudd’s (2008) research exhibited that a transformational leadership style affects graduation rates. Developing the transformational leadership abilities of college deans is one way for for-profit and nonprofit institutions to meet the educational mandates for increased undergraduate student graduation rates.

**Implications for Theory**

Nworie (2012) provided a theoretical framework for distance education based on established leadership theories. The central premise of Nworie’s research was that higher education leaders must understand their leadership style and its consequences. Avila (2016) took Nworie’s theoretical framework one step further, doing a mixed-method study based on Bass’s TLSi. The results of her quantitative survey showed that institutions whose deans possessed higher scores in team-building skills, personal/ interpersonal skills, and character/integrity (i.e., transformational leadership style) had a higher graduation rate.

Bogler et al. (2013) used the FRLM to examine the effect of transformational and passive leadership styles of nonprofit, online higher learning institution instructors on students learning outcomes. Their results showed that the FRLM applies to the asynchronous online instructional setting, suggesting that students' success relates to the leader's style. The results of my study showed that the deans from for-profit and nonprofit colleges who participated exhibited a transformational leadership style, suggesting that leadership style may not relate to the known differences in graduation rates between these two types of institutions. Therefore, I recommend addressing the known differences in graduation rates between for-profit and nonprofit colleges by expanding the structure of the study and introducing other variables plus theories that might address the discrepancies in graduation rates between for-profit schools and nonprofit schools.

**Implications for Practice**

Before completing this research, no studies explored private for-profit and nonprofit college deans' perceptions of their leadership styles and how they affect graduation rates. The findings presented in this study add to the literature regarding deans' perception of leadership on undergraduate graduation rates in for-profit and nonprofit higher learning institutions. The findings also produced data that university decision-makers can use in selecting deans who can positively impact graduation rates.

Jones and Rudd (2008) and Avila (2016) demonstrated that a transformational leadership style has a positive influence on educational institution's graduation rates**.** The evidence presented in the study showing that the college deans from both for-profit and nonprofit institutions exhibited a transformational leadership style should encourage senior leaders of for-profit and nonprofit institutions to provide deans transformational leadership development and promote leaders with a transformational leadership style to the dean's position. Developing the transformational leadership abilities of college deans is one way for for-profit and nonprofit institutions to meet the educational mandates for increased undergraduate student graduation rates.

## Conclusions

The purpose of this qualitative comparative case study was to explore private for-profit and nonprofit college deans' perceptions of their leadership styles and how that style affects graduation rates. The study results indicated numerous comparisons between the leadership dynamics of deans from nonprofit schools and deans from for-profit schools. The themes revealed that both deans from for-profit and nonprofit institutions have a largely positive view of leadership. The study results demonstrated that deans from for-profit and nonprofit institutions succeed by applying behaviors consistent with transformational leadership theory.

Also, the study's findings reflect many similarities between how the deans from nonprofit schools and deans from for-profit schools perceive their leadership style affects graduation rates. The results of the interviews with the deans from both for-profit and nonprofit institutions show an analogous foundation built on the transformational leadership theory. Studies by Jones and Rudd (2008) and Avila (2016) have shown that using a transformational leadership style positively influences educational institutions' graduation rates.

This study's importance to social change involves the need for increased U.S. college graduation rates in response to the global changes (De Freitas et al., 2015). The demand for college-educated people creates operational pressures on for-profit higher learning institutions to improve student graduation rates (De Freitas et al., 2015). Insights gained from the results of conducting the study may lead to for-profit and nonprofit online educational institutions creating leadership training programs for deans to improve undergraduate graduation rates and promoting individuals to the position of dean have a transformational leadership style.

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# Appendix A: Expert Review of Interview Questions

Expert Review

College Deans' Perceptions of How Their Leadership Styles Affect Graduation Rates

by

John Johnston

## Expert Review

The purpose of this expert review was to check the cogency of the interview questions for the proposed study. An expert review involves asking three experts to provide their feedback on the appropriateness of the interview questions based on the study's purpose statement, research question, and specific problem. This feedback took the form of answers to the four questions listed at the end of this document.

## Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative comparative case study is to explore for-profit and nonprofit private college deans' perceptions of how their leadership styles may affect graduation rates. A comparative case study approach may provide in-depth insight into the perceptions of college deans in nonprofit higher learning institutions about the effect of their leadership styles on undergraduate graduation rates versus the perceptions of college deans in for-profit higher learning institutions throughout the United States.

## Research Questions

RQ: What are college deans' perceptions of how their leadership style affects graduation rates?

The subquestions were:

- How do for-profit higher learning institution deans perceive their leadership style affects graduation rates?

- How do nonprofit higher learning institution deans perceive their leadership style affects graduation rates?
- What are the similarities and differences between how for-profit and nonprofit higher learning institution deans perceive their leadership style affects graduation rates?

## Specific Problem

The specific problem is that college dean's leadership style may contribute to the low graduation rate in higher learning institutions.

## Interview Protocol

### Background Questions

The semistructured interviews with the deans participating in this study will provide the data necessary to answer the primary research question posed in the study: What are college deans' perceptions of how their leadership styles affect graduation rates?

I will begin the interview by gathering some background information:

1. How many years have you been teaching undergraduate students?
2. How long have you been a dean here?
3. Have you been a dean at any other school?

### Semistructured Interview Guide

There are five general questions and some probing questions for clarification that I would like to ask you. I will record the interview and take notes as we work through the questions. I want to remind participants that I would like them to share their perceptions of how their leadership styles affect graduation rates in this higher learning institution. Start with asking if there are any questions each participant would like to ask me before beginning.

1. Please describe your leadership style. [Prompt as necessary for details.]
2. What do you perceive to be the effect of your leadership style on the graduation rates of students in your program? [Prompt as necessary for examples of how and why the leadership style affects graduation rates.]
3. Please describe the typical leadership style of other deans in your institution. [Prompt as necessary for details.]
4. What do you perceive to be the effect of other deans' leadership styles on the graduation rates of students in their programs? [Prompt as necessary for examples of how and why their leadership style affects graduation rates.]
5. Is there anything you would like to add about how the leadership style of a college dean affects graduation rates?

## About the Interview Questions

Please provide your expert feedback on the appropriateness of the interview questions by answering these questions:

1. Are the interview questions clear?
2. Are the interview questions appropriate for the design (comparative case study)?

3. Will the interview questions adequately answer the research question?

4. What changes, if any, would you make to the interview questions? Why?

Appendix B: Interview Process

**Interview Preparation**

1. Prepare a list of deans and their institutions taken from bookyourdata.com's list of current deans and their email that fit the selection criteria of being an academic dean in either a for-profit or nonprofit higher learning institution.
2. Send each dean that fit the selection criteria of being an academic dean in either a private for-profit or private nonprofit higher learning institution, an e-mail with a letter of invitation to participate in the study.
3. Provide all deans who agree to participate in the study with a consent form that outlines the study, procedures, risks and benefits, and voluntary nature of the research. The deans provide their informed consent by replying "I consent" to the email.
4. Prepare the resources required to conduct the interview based on the Zoom cloud bases platform, and confirmation of the agreed-upon time and location of the interview.

**Beginning the Interview Process**

1. The next step is preparing and setting up the resources required to conduct the interview based on each dean's preferred remote audio interview techniques, and the agreed-upon time/ location of the interview, plus check the picture and sound quality.

2. Begin the interview session by recording the date, time, location, and identifier code.
3. Start the interview session with introductions, express appreciation to the dean for participating in the study and review the research study description.
4. Explain to each participant that I will record each audio session, transcribe it later, and provide a summary of the main points in the transcription for their review, which is member-checking.
5. Reiterate the participant's rights to cancel the interview at any time and of the confidential nature of the study data.
6. Finally, explain that the insights gained from conducting the study may lead to for-profit online educational institutions creating leadership training programs for deans to improve undergraduate graduation rates, and the findings may add to the literature base regarding deans' perception of leadership on undergraduate graduation rates in for-profit and nonprofit higher learning institutions.

**Conducting the Interview**

1. Remind each dean interviewed that they may stop the audio process at any time for any reason.
2. Start asking the interview question, listen for potential follow-up probing questions, and take notes on non-verbal cues, which might lead to a better understanding of the participant's answers.

3. Paraphrase the responses back to the participant to help verify the understanding of each answer.
4. If necessary, conduct additional interviews of less than one hour to allow the dean to explain and explore answers to the questions further.

**Ending the Interview**

1. Extend my gratitude to each participant for taking the time to participate in the interview process.
2. Inform the participant that I will contact them at a later date to provide a summary and copy of the transcript, plus a note asking them to email back their thoughts and perspective about the validity of the interview data within a couple of weeks if any changes are necessary (member-checking).
3. Stop the audio recording after they have answered the interview questions and I have answered all questions the participant may have at the time and provided my email and mobile phone number for any follow-up questions the participant may have later.

# Appendix C: Interview Protocol

The interview protocol included approaches to form trust and a constructive relationship between the participants. The participants reviewed and agreed to the guidelines on the informed consent form before returning the document to the researcher. On the participant consent form, and at the beginning of the interview process, I stated the purpose of the study research, which is to explore college deans' perceptions of their leadership styles and how that leadership style affects graduation rates. A qualitative, comparative study approach may provide in-depth insight into the perceptions of college deans in nonprofit higher learning institutions about the effect of their leadership styles on undergraduate graduation rates versus the perceptions of college deans in for-profit higher learning institutions.

## Background Questions

The semistructured interviews with the deans participating in this study provided the data necessary to answer the primary research question posed in the study: What are college deans' perceptions of their leadership styles and how their leadership style affects graduation rates?

I will begin the interview by gathering some background information:

1. How many years have you been teaching undergraduate students?
2. How long have you been a dean here?
3. Have you been a dean at any other school? Which school?

## Semistructured Interview Guide

There are five general questions and some probing questions for clarification that I would like to ask you. I recorded the interview and take notes as we work through the questions. I want to remind you that I would like you to share your perceptions of how your leadership style affects undergraduate graduation rates in this higher learning institution. Do you have any questions regarding this process or anything on the Informed Consent form that you agreed to earlier?

6. What is the graduation rate in your program?
7. What is the graduation rate in your school?
8. What do you think contributes to these graduation rates?
9. Please describe your leadership style. [Prompt as necessary for details. If necessary, provide some basic idea of the main leadership styles per the FRLM.]
10. What do you perceive to be the effect of your leadership style on the graduation rates of students in your program? [Prompt as necessary for examples of how and why the leadership style affects graduation rates.]
11. Please describe the typical leadership style of other deans in your institution. [Prompt as necessary for details.]
12. What do you perceive to be the effect of other deans' leadership styles on the graduation rates of students in their programs? [Prompt as necessary for examples of how and why their leadership style affects graduation rates.]

13. Is there anything you would like to add about how the leadership style of a college dean affects graduation rates?

# Appendix D: Zoom Privacy and Security Policies

(*Video Conferencing, Web Conferencing, Webinars, Screen Sharing*, 2020): https://zoom.us/docs/en-us/privacy-and-security.html

- Encryption: Protecting your event content by encrypting the session's video, audio, and screen sharing. This content is protected with the Advanced Encryption Standard (AES) 256 using a one-time-key for that specific session when using a Zoom client.
- Audio Signatures: Embeds a user's personal information into the audio as an inaudible watermark if they record during a meeting. If the audio file is shared without permission, Zoom can help identify which participant recorded the meeting.
- Watermark Screenshots: Superimposes an image, consisting of a portion of a meeting participant's email address, onto the shared content they are viewing, and the video of the person who is sharing their screen.
- Local Recording Storage: Recordings stored locally on the host's device can be encrypted if desired using various free or commercially available tools.
- Cloud Recording Storage: Cloud Recordings are processed and stored in Zoom's cloud after the meeting has ended; these recordings can be passcode-protected or available only to people in your organization. If a meeting host enables cloud recording and audio transcripts, both were stored encrypted.

- File transfer storage: If a meeting host enables file transfer through in-meeting chat, those shared files will be stored encrypted and will be deleted within 31 days of the meeting.
- Cloud recording access: Meeting recording access is limited to the meeting host and account admin. The meeting/webinar host authorizes others to access the recording with options to share publicly, internal-only, add registration to view, enable/disable the ability to download, and an option to protect the recording.