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## **Strategies for Maintaining the Financial Sustainability of Nonprofit Organizations During Economic Downturns**

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*Walden University*

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# Walden University

College of Management and Human Potential

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Kingsley Siribour

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Walden University  
2024

Abstract

Strategies for Maintaining the Financial Sustainability of Nonprofit Organizations During  
Economic Downturns

by

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MS, Zurich University, 2000

MBA, Concordia University Wisconsin, 2004

BS, Lakeland University, 2013

Doctoral Study Proposal Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Business Administration

Walden University

March 2024

## Abstract

Nonprofit organizations rely primarily on external funding sources, such as government and philanthropic organizations, and are susceptible to revenue losses and lack of financial sustainability during economic uncertainties and hardships. Financial stability can help the organization's ability to serve the community, positively impacting the quality of life for its communities. Grounded in transformational leadership theory, the purpose of this qualitative multiple-case study was to explore strategies that some nonprofit business leaders use to maintain financial sustainability during economic downturns. Participants included four business leaders from four nonprofit organizations in Wisconsin with successful strategies to maintain financial sustainability during economic downturns. Data were collected from semistructured interviews and company documents. Thematic analysis of the data resulted in four themes: focus on fiscal oversights and operational funding, focus on human resources, review operational capacities of program services, and maintain strong internal systems and infrastructure. A key recommendation includes ensuring sufficient capacity-building management resources by implementing endowments and long-term investments as contingency plans to face economic crises. The implications for positive social change have the potential for nonprofit business leaders to maintain the positive impact nonprofits provide to their communities.

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## Dedication

I dedicate this doctoral study to my parents, especially to my late father, Papa Kofi Otuo Siribuo, who has been cheering me up throughout my life and is now smiling from Heaven to see this major milestone. Also, this achievement is a special dedication to my forebearers, who have been an inspiration, spiritually and through their past community sacrifices, to contribute to making the world a better place. Additionally, I dedicate this study to the next generation of my family and future positive social change agents to overcome challenges and be an inspiration to continue improving their communities and the world in general. Finally, I dedicate this doctoral achievement to the many special people, whose names I cannot list, who prayed for or supported me, particularly for this study's resources or during hard times, to cross the finish line.

## Acknowledgments

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## Section 1: Foundation of the Study

Many nonprofits are primarily reliant on external funding sources, such as government and philanthropic organizations, and are susceptible to revenue losses and lack of financial sustainability during economic uncertainties and hardships (Lin & Wang, 2016; Piatak & Pettijohn, 2021b). Some leaders of nonprofit organizations face severe fiscal stress periods during economic downturns because they lack strategies to maintain financial sustainability (Piatak & Pettijohn, 2021b). Lin and Wang (2016) found that during the Great Recession of 2008-2009, 40% of nonprofit leaders reported facing financial sustainability crises (Piatak & Pettijohn, 2021b). In Section 1 of this research study, I discuss the financial sustainability problems most nonprofit organizations face during economic downturns. In addition, I present the specific strategies some nonprofit leaders lack in financial survival during economic crises.

### **Background of the Problem**

Some researchers have identified three major factors that differentiate nonprofit organizations' lack of sustainability during economic crisis (Kim et al., 2020; López-Arceiz et al., 2017). Based on the study by López-Arceiz et al. (2017), the three primary causes of high financial stress during economic downturn include (a) high dependency on government funding, (b) changing relationships between staff and volunteers, and (c) lack of market opportunities (Kim et al., 2020).

Previous researchers have studied factors that contribute to employees' performance, particularly leadership styles, and the effect of these factors on organizational effectiveness (Al Khajeh, 2018; Byung-Jik et al., 2018). In addition,

researchers have studied current nonprofit financing models and organizational effectiveness based on financial sustainability and have identified many struggling nonprofits; they recommend further investigation and revision of the old fundraising strategies to maintain organizational effectiveness (Piatak & Pettijohn, 2021b). In summary, the purpose of this study was to further provide scholars and practitioners in-depth understanding of strategies nonprofit business leaders use to maintain financial sustainability during economic downturns.

### **Problem and Purpose**

The specific business problem is that some nonprofit business leaders lack strategies to maintain financial sustainability during economic downturns. The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies that some nonprofit business leaders use to maintain financial sustainability during economic downturns. The target population consisted of four business leaders from four different 501(c)(3) nonprofits in the State of Wisconsin with successful strategies to maintain financial sustainability during economic downturns.

### **Population and Sampling**

Researchers must align the study's overarching research question with participants' eligibility criteria. Brown et al. (2018) recommended researchers align the study's overarching research question with participants' eligibility criteria. The sample consisted of four business leaders from four different 501(c)(3) nonprofits in the State of Wisconsin with successful strategies to maintain financial sustainability during economic downturns, allowing them to survive the Great Recession of 2008-09. Purposeful

sampling entails the identification and selection of participants meeting the established criteria for participation in a research study (Bhardwaj, 2019). I used purposeful sampling because it enabled me to screen the participant population by choosing only those individuals meeting the established participation criteria to collect valuable data. The participation criteria were nonprofit business leaders possessing at least 15 years of experience using successful strategies to maintain financial sustainability during economic downturns, allowing them to survive the Great Recession of 2008-2009. Using public background information, such as LinkedIn and other credible social media and company websites, prior to the meeting, I contacted each participant purposefully selected to ensure that the participant had successfully used financial sustainability strategies during economic downturns, allowing them to survive the Great Recession of 2008-09. If the participant's organization survived economic downturns, including the Great Recession of 2008-09, it may indicate that the participant used successful strategies. Researchers must align the study's overarching research question with participants' eligibility criteria (Brown et al., 2018).

Researchers face challenges associated with identifying suitable organizations and gaining access to participants (FitzPatrick, 2019). To face these challenges successfully, FitzPatrick (2019) recommended that researchers engage with important organizational individuals, utilize a variety of recruitment strategies, and know the target audience. Collaborating with important organizational individuals was an effective strategy to identify suitable organizations and participants because I shared with them my desire to conduct this study at their organization. Regarding data sources that I used, I conducted

semistructured interviews and reviewed organizational documentation and artifacts to explore strategies that some nonprofit business leaders use to maintain financial sustainability during economic downturns. I analyzed business and fundraising strategies, previous financial records (e.g., forms 990), documents showing actions by key management personnel and board members, and any other document containing business and corporate partnerships related to strategies nonprofit business leaders use to maintain financial sustainability during economic downturns.

### **Nature of the Study**

Researchers use a qualitative approach to explore an issue or a problem by allowing participants to express their experiences and to mitigate potential bias between participants and researchers in contact during studies (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Accordingly, the qualitative method was the appropriate research approach for this study. Researchers use the quantitative method to explain a phenomenon or an outcome by examining the relationships among variables through interpretation of empirical data collected from individuals or groups through reliable instruments' scales (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018). I did not examine the relationships among variables and interpreting empirical data; therefore, the quantitative method was not appropriate. The mixed-method approach includes using both qualitative and quantitative methods (Yin, 2018). I did not include the quantitative method in my exploration of strategies nonprofit business leaders use to maintain sustainability; therefore, the mixed-method approach was not suitable for this study.

Based on my objective to explore strategies that some nonprofit business leaders use to maintain financial sustainability during economic downturns, the multiple case study design was appropriate for this study. According to Yin (2018), researchers use the case study design to provide in-depth description and analysis of a real-life phenomenon through a collection of multiple sources of information, such as interviews, documents and reports, and observations. I selected the multiple case study design over the single case study because Yin (2018) stated that the multiple case study is a more rigorous design. In a single case study design, a researcher focuses on studying a specific individual, group, or case as a unit for in-depth analysis (Yin, 2018). In a multiple case study, researchers investigate two or more units of cases to explore differences or similarities (Yin, 2018).

Other qualitative research designs include ethnographic and phenomenological (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018). A researcher uses an ethnographic design to conduct direct and long-term social interactions with participants to observe and understand a cultural phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Researchers use the phenomenological design to study in-depth meaning of lived experiences of participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018). I used interviews, documents and reports, and reliable secondary records without close observations or lived experience exploration. Therefore the ethnographic and phenomenological designs were not appropriate for this study.

### **Research Question**

What strategies do some nonprofit business leaders use to maintain financial sustainability during economic downturns?

### **Interview Questions**

1. What strategies do you use to maintain financial sustainability during economic downturns?
2. How did your employees respond to those strategies?
3. How did you identify these strategies to maintain financial sustainability during economic downturns?
4. How do you measure the effectiveness of each financial sustainability strategy?
5. What modifications did you apply to any strategy to improve its effectiveness in maintaining financial sustainability during economic downturns?
6. What key barriers did you encounter to implementing strategies to maintain financial sustainability during economic downturns?
7. How did you overcome the key barriers to implementing strategies to maintain financial sustainability during economic downturns?
8. What additional information regarding strategies for maintaining financial sustainability during economic downturns would you like to share that we have not already discussed?

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework for this study was the transformational leadership theory. Burns (1978) developed the transformational leadership framework, and Bass (1985) later expanded Burns' work. Researchers use the transformational leadership theory to explain that leaders can inspire followers to change perceptions, expectations,



and motivations to achieve common goals. The key constructs fundamental to transformational leadership theory include (a) idealized influences, (b) individualized esteem, (c) inspirational motivation, and (d) intellectual stimulation (Burns, 1978). As explained by Northouse (2021), transformational leaders can inspire followers to achieve common goals. I used transformational leadership theory as a lens for exploring strategies nonprofit business leaders use to maintain financial sustainability during economic downturns because of transformational leadership theory's effective use to inspire followers to achieve common goals.

### **Operational Definitions**

*Economic downturn:* An economic downturn is defined as the period in the economic cycle, such as the 2008-2009 Great Recession, during which businesses and the economy as a whole face severe financial hardships (Lin & Wang, 2016).

*Hybrid organizations (hybrids, social businesses, or enterprises):* Hybrid organizations are combinations of mission-based and business-nonprofit partnership approaches to create revenues and seek capital in ways that may be similar in for-profit and nonprofit business models (Candi et al., 2018). Candi et al. (2018) referred to hybrid organizations (or hybrids) in various terms including hybrid firm, social hybrid venture, and benefit corporation with all terms mainly focused on the duality of social impact alongside financial sustainability.

*Nonprofit sustainability:* The complete attainment of the organizational-mission mandate and the capacity to bear cost through long-term business activities (Jensen, 2018).

## **Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations**

### **Assumptions**

Pyrczak (2016) defined an assumption in research as something that a researcher presumes to be accurate even though the direct proof of its accuracy is either absent or very little. First, I assumed that participants' responses to the interview questions would be accurate and honest. Second, I assumed that any additional information I retrieved from other sources, such as organizational websites, was accurate. Third, I assumed that participants were successful in implementing strategies to remain financially sustainable during economic downturns. Finally, I assumed that using the interview questions and any other sources of organizational documents, I captured the required information in the data collection process.

### **Limitations**

A limitation is an impediment or constraint that potentially obstructs the validity of study results (Pyrczak, 2016). First, I limited my research study to the State of Wisconsin and, therefore, findings from the study may not be transferable to other geographic locations. Second, due to sometimes opaque fundraising and management practices, nonprofit business leaders participating in the study may have limited the information they were willing to share during the interview process. Third, I needed to be mindful of personal biases or emotional attachments about specific interview questions and responses during the interview process, which may influence interpretation of results. Fourth, I was not 100% sure that participants had been successful in implementing strategies to remain financially sustainable during economic downturns. Finally, I

included a small sample of local nonprofit business leaders in the study, which may limit the reliability of data obtained during the study.

### **Delimitations**

A delimitation is a boundary a researcher intentionally places on a study (Yin, 2018). I identified two delimitations for this study. First, I included only four nonprofit business leaders from four nonprofit organizations in the State of Wisconsin, which survived the Great Recession of 2008-09. Second, I included only small or medium-sized independent, community-based nonprofit organizations without large corporate affiliate influence or support.

### **Significance of the Study**

Although nonprofit organizations play crucial socioeconomic roles in various communities, some nonprofit business leaders lack strategies to maintain financial sustainability during economic downturns. The majority of nonprofit organizations are unable to deliver needed services to their clients during economic downturns (Brooks, 2018; Mitchell & Berlan, 2018; Piatak & Pettijohn, 2021b). The findings of this study may be valuable to nonprofit organizations because many nonprofit leaders may require an understanding of the strategies they can use to achieve or maintain financial sustainability to continue their work of solving societal problems, particularly during economic downturns.

### **Contribution to Business Practice**

Using the findings from this study may improve business practice by supporting the identification of strategies nonprofit leaders employ to develop sustainable financing

models that allow them to maintain the delivery of quality services during economic downturns. Lin and Wang (2016) and Piatak and Pettijohn (2021b) found that most nonprofits face severe financial stress during economic downturns and need to reduce the provision of much-needed services to the community even while demand increases. During the Great Recession of 2008-2009, demand for social services increased by 100% while over 40% of nonprofits reported a loss of revenues needed to achieve mission goals (Lin & Wang, 2016; Piatak & Pettijohn, 2021b). The identification of strategies for maintaining financial sustainability during economic downturns might enable nonprofit leaders to design and implement strategies that allow their organizations to survive during economic downturn and accomplish their missions effectively.

### **Implications for Social Change**

Nonprofit organizations play an essential role in improving the socioeconomic condition of members of poor or disadvantaged communities. Historically, however, most nonprofit organizations do not have adequate financial resources to accomplish their mission (Brooks, 2018; Mitchell & Berlan, 2018; Piatak & Pettijohn, 2021b). By using the results of this study, nonprofit leaders might be able to develop and implement contemporary and sustainable strategies used during economic downturns to maintain the positive impact that nonprofits provide to the communities they serve.

### **A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature**

I explored peer-reviewed professional and academic literature, published in various journals and seminal scholarly books, to ascertain findings of prior research studies in the field of nonprofit financial sustainability during economic downturns.

Using Google Scholar, connected to the Walden University Library's website as the principal source, I retrieved journal articles from the various database offered through the Walden University Library. The Walden University Library provides students entry to variety of databases. Source Complete, ABI/INFORM Complete, Emerald Management, Sage Premier, Academic Search Complete, and ProQuest Central were among the databases I used to retrieve literature for this study. Moreover, I also searched in various open journals to retrieve literature related to nonprofit financial sustainability. AOSIS OpenJournals offers open access to peer-reviewed scholarly journals from varieties of academic disciplines. Similarly, ScienceDirect offers both tolled and open access to a full-text scientific database entailing journal articles and book chapters. In certain situations, I used government websites to acquire information about nonprofit financial sustainability.

I searched for available literature using keywords and phrases in the different databases listed above. I used filters to database searches to refine the search outcomes. These filters involved particular databases, particular keywords, and a particular period. When using Google Scholar, I prioritized articles publicized in or after 2019, to make sure the literature was related to the topics and useful. Secondly, I prioritized articles that existed in the Walden University Library. I used specific keywords such as *nonprofits*, *nonprofit organizations*, *financial sustainability*, *transformational leadership*, *entrepreneurship*, and *strategies*. I used Ulrich's Periodicals Directory to verify that literature was peer-reviewed. The 231 references that this study contains include 208 scholarly peer-reviewed articles representing 90% of the total, five nonpeer-reviewed

articles representing 2%, three government websites representing 1%, and 15 books representing 7%. The total number of references in this study published within the 2019-2023 period is 190, which is 82% of the total number. The literature review contains 41 references, with 30 references published within the 2019-2023 period, representing 73%, and 37 from scholarly peer-reviewed sources, representing 90%.

### **Literature Review Organization**

There are several subsections in the literature review section. It starts with an introduction entailing facts about the method for reviewing the literature, the occurrences, and the proportions of peer-reviewed articles, as well as issuing times. In the following part, I concentrate on using the literature to address the overarching research question and involving a short narrative about the intent of the study. The topics I deliberate in this literature review include (a) the study's conceptual framework, (b) a brief overview of the development of the research construct over time, and (c) leadership and leadership styles relating to the research topic.

The first topic, the study's conceptual framework, involves a critical assessment and synthesis of the conceptual framework I chose for my research study, which is the transformational leadership theory using supporting and contrasting theories from important literature on the topic of nonprofit financial sustainability. The second topic, development of research construct, begins with a short summary of the development of financial sustainability strategies construct progressively. I discuss general challenges involving the construct including the various explanations, origins, and effects of financial sustainability strategies. The third and last topic for deliberation involves

exploring in detail various research studies related to financial sustainability strategies business leaders use to maintain financial sustainability. The two main themes discussed include business or corporate strategic partnerships with nonprofits and financial management practices used by business leaders.

### **Application to the Applied Business Problem**

My goal for this qualitative multiple case research study was to investigate the strategies that some nonprofit business leaders use to maintain financial sustainability during economic downturns. Achieving comprehension of such methods needed the qualitative method with an exploratory multiple case study. The results of this research study might add to a deeper understanding of financial sustainability strategies from nonprofit leaders' viewpoints.

The results of the research may be used to develop suitable approaches in maintaining nonprofits' financial sustainability, particularly during economic downturns. Suitable approaches might provide leaders with enhanced financial sustainability strategies. The outcomes from this research study might enhance business practice by resulting in suitable approaches, driving improved productivity, and obtaining organizational competitive edge. The possibility for societal transformation bases on the development of systems to enhance financial sustainability and individual welfare.

### **Transformational Leadership Theory**

The effectiveness of management and the sustainability of many nonprofits and most businesses may depend on the leadership styles of the business leaders. In this literature review subsection, I examine the role of transformational leadership theory and

the impact on the managerial effectiveness and sustainability of nonprofit organizations. Through the lens of transformational leadership theory, nonprofit leaders may obtain a deeper understanding of the financial sustainability strategies of nonprofit organizations, particularly in times of economic downturns.

A connection exists between leadership and sustainability. Comminos (2020) found that leadership and sustainability are two associated concepts that have drawn a lot of attention in recent years within businesses during harsh economic situations. In the vigorous commerce marketplace, the effect transformational leadership has on the sustainability of a company has become a common theme of conversation (Comminos, 2020). Comminos studied the impact transformational leaders have on employees when aspiring to gain sustainability and found that transformational leaders grow a vigorous workforce and are beneficial to other leadership groups across the business space (Comminos, 2020). Comminos found the positive effect that transformational leaders' behaviors have on gaining organizational financial sustainability. Comminos considered that past literature also provided findings about the impact transformational leadership and a business culture that centers on employee development have on achieving business financial sustainability. Using the qualitative research method, Comminos highlighted the correlation between transformational leadership and organizational sustainability during difficult economic times in a business. Comminos collected data from five top-management staff in the transportation and supply chain management industry. Utilizing thematic coding, Comminos analyzed participants' responses to interview questions. Comminos found that transformational leadership had a positive effect on the



sustainability of an organization. There is a connection between leadership and sustainability, as transformational leaders facilitate the change management process within a business market, improving the level of sustainability for the organization.

However, building a corporate culture that supports long-term business sustainability may require transactional leadership. Comminos (2020) acknowledged in the findings the opposing viewpoints of transformational leadership that building a corporate culture that supports long-term business sustainability involved the need for complementary leadership approaches, such as transactional leadership. For example, transactional leadership focuses on diverse extrinsic and intrinsic factors including organizational environments and employees' perspectives as opposed to transformational characteristics alone which focuses on leaders' characteristics.

Some researchers argue that no single leadership model or theory, such as transformational leadership alone, is superior to other leadership styles or can solve every organizational problem including maintaining financial sustainability. Brown et al. (2020) discovered that servant leadership approach, which emphasizes on developing and supporting individuals within an institution, might be converged with the transformational leadership model, focusing on inspiring followers to work towards common goals, for leaders in stressful environments in ideally solving various organizational sustainability problems. No single theory or model should be considered superior to others because a single theory is unable to solve every problem an organization faces.

Transformational leaders have been successful in sustaining their businesses. Murari and Mukherjee (2021) claimed that authentic transformational leadership style is a more suitable approach of leadership to build management efficiency and business sustainability due to the very competitive and dynamic current business environments. Murari and Mukherjee explored various leadership styles to identify the most effective in achieving business excellence. Murari and Mukherjee identified that the transformational leadership approach has various key characteristics of managerial excellence and sustainability, which are (a) provides a clear vision, (b) inspires motivation, (c) creates trust, (d) generates intellectual stimulation, (e) develops organizational creativity, (f) creates transparency, (g) provides knowledge and wisdom, (h) values congruency, (i) achieves conscientiousness, and (j) realizes individualized thoughtfulness. Murari and Mukherjee proposed that these key characteristics are fundamental for business excellence and sustainability by providing job satisfaction, organizational excellence and effectiveness, and motivation to employees. However, Murari and Mukherjee found that some researchers question the dominance of transformational leadership as most important leadership style on morality grounds and suggested that morality be part of the characteristics of a true transformational leadership to achieve managerial excellence and sustainability.

The transformational leadership characteristics Murari and Mukherjee (2021) identified lead to the discovery that additional insights are needed on the limited knowledge regarding the comparisons of various leadership theories related to business excellence, including nonprofit leadership styles for sustainability. Murari and Mukherjee

correlated managerial effectiveness and sustainability with organizational excellence for competitive edge.

Peng et al. (2020b) found that the transformational leadership approach has a direct and, in some cases, an indirect effect on employees' psychological attachment to their organizations in public and nonprofit work environments. Peng et al. used the moderated mediation model to explore the circumstances that need to exist for transformational leaders to convert them into affective organizational loyalty by employees. In addition, Peng et al. found that the employees' affective organizational attachment is linked through perceived work impact. Peng et al. suggested that a key finding of the indirect effect of transformational leadership on affective employees' commitment through perceived work impact is connected to the moderated degree of centralization in the organization. Peng et al. posited that the influence of transformational leadership can enhance, through perception of work impact, the employees' affective organizational commitment (Peng et al., 2020b). Despite its dominance, scholars have identified inadequacies in research that uses models of transformational leadership, such as its significant overlaps with other styles of effective leadership, and the potential of confusing the leader's behavior and the impact on followers in measurements (Bass, 1998; Peng et al., 2020b).

Transformational leadership has a positive impact on employees' innovative work-related behavior for financial sustainability. Vila-Vázquez et al. (2018) examined the psychology of organizational sustainability to further understand key factors that contribute to the promotion of this phenomenon, including creating organizational

climates that enhance employees' well-being and corresponding leadership roles. Vila-Vázquez et al. simultaneously studied the interrelationships between the mediating role of task significance, employees' core self-evaluations (CSE) and perceived organizational support (POS), and the impact of the managers' transformational leadership on job engagement. Vila-Vázquez et al. showed that the enhancement of the well-being of employees through transformational leadership has a positive impact on job engagement and sustainability. Li et al. (2019) also found that transformational leadership has a positive impact on employees' innovative work-related behavior for financial sustainability. However, Vila-Vázquez et al. (2018) discovered that a more correct validation of the transformational leadership theory should involve psychological states as part of the mediating variables and therefore suggested that future studies could expand on research testing the mediation of psychological states in the relationships between the mediating variables and job engagement.

Transformational leadership and the mediating roles of followers' behaviors to organizational change have gained rapid interest among leadership studies for business scholars and practitioners. Groves (2020) identified (a) the mediating roles of a follower's readiness to transform values and a follower's self-dependence values in linking transformational leadership to the follower's change opposition and the follower's additional effort, respectively; and (b) the regulating function of organization change magnitude in impacting the mediation effects. Transformational leadership theory includes the hypothesis that some followers' attitudinal and performance outcomes are at least partly determined by a leader's ability to impact followers' values to facilitate

organizational change (Groves, 2020). Using Preacher et al.'s (2007) moderated mediation framework, Groves confirmed through this transformational leadership research study by testing the roles of leader behavior, follower values, and a primary contextual variable in resulting impact on follower attitudinal and performance effects in achieving business sustainability outcomes. Peng et al. (2021) conducted a meta-analysis study and identified the impact of transformational leadership style on employees' reactions toward organizational change. Notwithstanding the dominant role that leaders play conveying values to followers, as a key mediator of follower impact in transformational leadership styles, only few empirical studies link transformational leadership and follower values (Groves, 2020). More studies are needed to demonstrate the extent of organizational change as a relevant determinant variable in achieving positive results, thereby undermining the validation of the transformational leadership theory (Groves, 2020).

There is a significant transformation of the nonprofit sector in recent times. According to Wiltshire et al. (2018), various influencing factors include rise in the number of organizations and workforce, a move from welfare and donation-based institutions to hybrid social enterprise business forms, stakeholder resource competitions, and rising pressures in accountability and transparency. Wiltshire et al. also found an increased complexity within the nonprofit sector, including shift from social services to advocacy for public policy changes for positive socio-economic changes. This growth and complexity have caused the need for innovative and entrepreneurial approaches to leadership that originates from a deep knowledge of the evolving nonprofit sector

(Wiltshire et al., 2018). To manage these rising challenges, Wiltshire et al. identified some key strategies through their case studies and reports from conceptual literature on transformational leadership, nonprofits, and social enterprises. Among the key strategies identified are corporate social responsibility partnerships for nonprofit leaders to support their organizations, employees, and communities during difficult times. Muralidharan and Pathak's (2018) study about transformational leadership, social enterprise, and sustainability also supported the impact of transformational leadership style and social entrepreneurship in achieving financial sustainability by nonprofits. The contrasting viewpoint of transformational leadership is the lack of moral dimension to its use and should be motivated by both the wider public interest and personal interest (Muralidharan & Pathak, 2018; Wiltshire et al., 2018).

There is currently an existing knowledge gap to understand the impact of leadership on volunteers' retention in nonprofit organizations. do Nascimento et al. (2018) explored the way transformational leaders can improve volunteers' proactive actions within an all-volunteer nonprofit organization. Based on Parker et al.'s (2010) theory of motivation, it was postulated that role breadth positive affect, self-direction and benevolence (work values), and self-efficacy would mediate the transformational leadership proactive behavior relationship (do Nascimento et al., 2018). Utilizing the structural equation modeling, do Nascimento et al. tested mediation hypotheses by assessing the indirect effects using bias-corrected intervals. Comparative analysis investigated by do Nascimento et al. of fit index and fit statistics suggested the model is plausible. These findings added to the understanding of the role that leaders perform in

enhancing followers' proactive behavior in volunteer organizations. Almas et al. (2020) also found that leadership styles enhanced followers' commitment, satisfaction, and retention. The results seemed to indicate that a useful strategy when implementing programs to improve the retention of volunteers is to train coordinators in transformational leadership skills. Although the findings aligned with previous research on the positive correlation between transformational leadership styles and followers' motivation to be proactive in performance, the opposing viewpoints included the lack of clear paths in the motivation levels, whether participants achieved intrinsically or extrinsically due to various conditions, which may affect its generalization or validity (do Nascimento et al., 2018).

Leadership styles are important factors that affect the enhancement of organizational performance and employees' job performance and the purposes they should follow, which also drives profits for their employers or contributes to society's socio-economic development. Manzoor et al. (2019) examined the impact of transformational leadership on job performance and the mediating mechanism of corporate social responsibility (CSR). Manzoor et al. collected primary data from small and medium enterprises (SMEs) employees located in Pakistan using a cross-sectional design method. Utilizing the regression analysis method, Manzoor et al. examined whether CSR mediated the correlation between transformational leadership and job performance. Manzoor et al. found that transformational leadership positively and completely predicts job performance. Specifically, CSR significantly mediated the effect of transformational leadership on job performance (Manzoor et al., 2019). Hongdao et al.

(2019) found that CSR activities by transformational leaders have a high impact on employees' job performance. Based on these findings, transformational leadership, job performance, and CSR interrelations are important elements of organizational sustainability. Despite the positive results observed on the effect of the transformational leadership model on job and organizational performances in this study, Manzoor et al. identified in agreement with some previous researchers the potential limitations, such as using cross-sectional study as research design, in collecting data and suggested future studies to include longitudinal design to enhance results validation.

Some researchers have looked at the predictors of innovative work behavior (IWB) in nonprofit companies through the lens of transformational leadership theory. For example, Messmann et al. (2021) claimed that innovative solutions are critical in schools because the quality of education, and hence the schools' competitiveness, is contingent on their ability to adapt to technical, economic, and societal changes. Messmann et al. explored the function of transformational leadership in boosting IWB and the role of basic psychological needs fulfillment in moderating this relationship. Using structural equation modeling, Messmann et al. discovered that transformative leadership was positively associated with teachers' autonomy and competency needs. Additionally, contentment with the demand for competence predicted instructors' IWB favorably and perceived competence acted as a complete mediator between transformative leadership and teachers' IWB (Messmann et al., 2021). Individuals in positions of leadership should embrace a transformational leadership style and motivate their colleagues through individual attention, intellectual stimulation, and support for goal attainment (Messmann



et al., 2021). Leaders can provide feedback on employees' innovative ideas and strategies for implementing innovative solutions, thereby raising their confidence in what they can accomplish and how they can improve their contributions to innovation development (Messmann et al., 2021). Messmann et al. suggested that efforts toward leadership development (e.g., training, coaching, and mentoring) should combine knowledge and practical experiences about transformational leadership, as well as its role in employees' IWB and contributions to organizational and professional development. Moreover, Messmann et al. agreed with some of the major limitations and opposing viewpoints identified by some researchers regarding the findings using transformational leadership style due to lack of longitudinal methodologies and studies to understand the mechanisms through which transformational leadership applies its impact on job outcomes to improve causal order of constructs and validation.

The concept of innovation in higher education institutions' administrative processes remains relevant due to the constant pressure on providers of higher education to develop new ideas and methods to fulfill the expanding needs of students and other interest groups. Theoretically grounded in transformational leadership theory, Owusu-Agyeman (2021) examined the characteristics that promote innovation among administrative staff in a higher education institution. To investigate the phenomenon, a hybrid method of data collection and analysis was used (Owusu-Agyeman, 2021). Engagement, motivation, communication flow, communication use, and decision-making contribute significantly to the participatory process, which is also necessary for fostering creativity among administrative employees (Owusu-Agyeman, 2021). Owusu-Agyeman

found these five variables clearly characterize the role of transformational leadership on innovation. On the other hand, expectation and contingency had a negligible effect on innovation among administrative workers (Owusu-Agyeman, 2021). Nonetheless, Owusu-Agyeman discovered that a key disadvantage of transformational leadership is that it does not incorporate situational circumstances that may permit followers or participants to perform tasks outside the group's goals, whereas the contingency theory has this advantage.

Some researchers have conducted studies to determine the effect of transformational leadership on employee work involvement. Xu et al. (2022) conducted a study in which a questionnaire survey was used in Southern China, using the cross-sectional survey method, to test the hypothesis using a combination of hierarchical regression and bootstrapping techniques. Xu et al. found that psychological safety acts as a mediating factor in the relationship between transformative leadership and job involvement. Additionally, Xu et al. identified the traditionalism of participating university professors bolstered the influence of psychological safety on job engagement. Xu et al. contributed to the body of knowledge on work involvement by evaluating the integrative impacts of different resources, all of which are linked to increasing the pool of resources available to university lecturers. Xu et al. shed light on ways to urge university lecturers to be more active in their profession.

Nonetheless, Xu et al. acknowledged key limitations of the roles transformational leadership may play in job involvement for generalization and validity in the findings. Using only the cross-sectional method makes it is difficult to identify causal relationships

among variables, without longitudinal field studies that can be used to collect data over a period repeatedly, to clarify whether causal relationships exist (Xu et al., 2022). Because of the importance of individual characteristics, as identified in the contingency theory, in leadership in influencing job involvement, lack of cross-cultural studies may affect the generalization and validity of the mediating role of transformation leadership in the research outcomes (Xu et al., 2022)

In summary, the topics I deliberated in this literature review included (a) the study's conceptual framework, (b) a brief overview of the development of the research construct over time, and (c) leadership and leadership styles relating to the research topic. Among the key topics I explored during my field research included roles of (a) corporate social responsibility, (b) followers' job performance and satisfaction, (c) self-transcending values, and (d) social enterprising as playing important moderate-mediating roles in achieving financial sustainability.

### **Transformational Leadership Versus Transactional Leadership**

With few studies examining the relative effectiveness of various leadership styles in nonprofit organizations, some researchers have compared and proposed a model in which work engagement mediates the effects of transformational and transactional leadership on affective commitment and organizational citizenship behavior among employees of nonprofit organizations. Aboramadan and Kundi (2020) examined whether transformational leadership is a more effective predictor of work engagement than transactional leadership. Structural equation modeling was used to verify the linkages using large-scale data collected from employees of two types of nonprofit organizations

(human service organizations and charities) in northern Italy. Aboramadan and Kundi discovered that the indirect effect of transformational leadership on affective commitment and organizational citizenship behavior was stronger than the indirect effect of transactional leadership via work engagement. Aboramadam and Kundi argued that the practical implications of their findings involve assisting business leaders to recognize critical factors that improve NPO employees' positive work outcomes for organizational sustainability. However, Aboramadam and Kundi acknowledged some key limitations that may reduce their results' generalizability and validity, including: (a) the cross-sectional design of this study prevented the research to conclude on cause-effect correlations, therefore, they recommended future research can repeat the study using longitudinal study to confirm the impacts of the study's variables over time; and (b) their findings evaluating the influence of control variables on the study variables showed a significant correlation, consequently, it would be insightful to compare their study model across various types of nonprofit organizations in order to determine why and how different kinds of nonprofit organizations influence employees' work-related outcomes.

### **Transformational Leadership Versus Servant Leadership**

Some researchers have questioned the importance of making comparisons between servant leadership and transformational leadership theories. Andersen (2018) presented a review of scholarly works on these two theories, ranging from Greenleaf's (1970), Burns' (1978), and Bass's (1985) original work to current research. Two competing alternatives are discernible in the scholarship of servant and transformational leadership based on the four categories of construct clarity (Andersen, 2018). Andersen

stated that each theory has 16 variants, and the literature review uncovered no new empirical data. The numerous variants of each theory available today render comparisons meaningless (Andersen, 2018). Andersen argued that the proliferation of multiple versions of theories on servant leadership and transformational leadership indicates that they have ceased to be specific and useful. Andersen claimed that the value of these theories is also debatable among contemporary scholars and practitioners due to lack of clarity of research methodologies and overlapping versions of various theories.

Positive relationships between transformational leadership and affective organizational commitment (AOC) exist. Cho et al. (2019) examined the relationship between leadership style and AOC in employees in Korea and the United States. Cho et al. found that the positive relationship between transformational leadership and AOC was stronger for American employees than for Korean employees, whereas transactional leadership was only positively associated with AOC for Korean employees (Cho et al., 2019). The differing and supporting findings, as compared to previous studies in leadership style, provided important theoretical and managerial implications of employees' positive contribution to achieve business sustainability in this cross-national context for current and future scholars and practitioners in the field of leadership theories (Cho et al., 2019). However, Cho et al. identified primary limitations, such as lack of time and psychological resources available to business leaders for their employees, may be attributed as disadvantages to validate and generalize these findings.

Comparing three emerging forms of positive leadership that place emphasis on ethical and moral behavior (i.e., authentic leadership, ethical leadership, and servant

leadership) to transformational leadership in terms of their associations with a variety of organizationally relevant measures is important. Hoch et al. (2018) found that while scholars have noted conceptual overlapping between transformational leadership and these newer leadership forms, there has been insufficient investigation of the empirical relationships between transformational leadership and these newer leadership forms, as well as their ability, or lack thereof, to explain incremental variance beyond transformational leadership (Hoch et al., 2018). Hoch et al. conducted a series of meta-analyses to provide a comprehensive assessment of the relationships between these emerging leadership forms and variables evaluated in the existing literature. Hoch et al. examined the relative effectiveness of each of these leadership styles in explaining incremental variance in nine outcomes beyond transformational leadership. Hoch et al. conducted a relative weights analysis to determine the relative contributions of emerging and transformational leadership styles. The high correlations between authentic and ethical leadership and transformational leadership, combined with their low incremental variance, indicated that their utility is limited unless very specific outcomes are being investigated (Hoch et al., 2018). Servant leadership, on the other hand, demonstrated greater promise as a stand-alone leadership approach that can assist researchers and practitioners in better explaining a variety of outcomes (Hoch et al., 2018). Hoch et al. suggested that the practical implications of the outcomes of this study, despite the prolific and overlapping nature of the emerging leadership styles, include clarity for businesses in developing the type of organizational culture desired for a particular situation in the recruitment and training of their leaders and staff. Nonetheless, Hoch et al. acknowledged

the prolific and overlapping leadership models can become confusing and counterproductive in building successful organizational goals.

Leadership has a significant impact on learning and development. According to Xie (2020), various styles of leadership have been found to be beneficial in fostering the development of a learning organization. Xie conducted an empirical study comparing the effects of transformational and servant leadership on a learning organization, which is an organization that is constantly transforming itself through learning and development techniques, in the context of Chinese SMEs. Xie used structural equation modeling to test four proposed hypotheses. Xie found that servant leadership has no predictive value for learning organizations, whereas transformational leadership is a strong predictor. By examining a structural model with three latent variables, which are servant leadership, transformational leadership, and learning organization, Xie advanced the understanding of the leadership style that is associated with learning organizations. Xie discovered, as in previous research findings, the positive managerial alignment including coaching managers and employees' improvements associated with transformational leadership in achieving organizational goals, such as maintaining financial sustainability during economic downturns. However, Xie pointed out some limitations in the study that may limit the validity of the findings, including (a) the study is cross-sectional research design; therefore, confirmation of causality amongst the variables was not possible; (b) possible interaction influences amongst variables were not considered; and (c) this study solely analyzed learning organization as a single-dimensional construct; therefore, individual level, team level, and structural level distinctions were not carefully made.

## **Financial Sustainability Strategies**

In this subsection, I explore some of the studies scholars conducted to identify the various organizational sustainability strategies business leaders use to directly and positively impact performance to maintain financial sustainability. There is a strong positive correlation between organizational sustainability practices and financial success (Alshehhi et al., 2018; Cantele & Zardini, 2020; Sroufe & Gopalakrishna-Remani, 2019).

More research is needed to fully understand the relationship between corporate sustainability and financial performance. Alshehhi et al. (2018) used content analysis to examine top-tier journals to determine the impact of corporate sustainability on financial performance. Alshehhi et al. found 78% of publications showed a positive relationship between corporate sustainability and financial performance. However, variations in research methodology and measurement of variables provided divergence opinions about various sources (Alshehhi et al., 2018). Alshehhi et al. identified that corporate sustainability is gradually focusing mostly on social responsibility in the literature and less on the environmental and economic sustainability practices. Alshehhi et al. suggested that more research is needed to fully understand the relationship between corporate sustainability and financial performance. Alshehhi et al. argued, however, the contribution of their research is important to social change by identifying the current state of the relationship between corporate sustainability dimensions, thus economic, environmental, and social measures, and financial performance and the areas that need to improve. Furthermore, future trends are highlighted for scholars and practitioners as guidance in formulating community policies; nonetheless, Alshehhi et al. highlighted few



key limitations of the study's outcomes such as the studied databases and the leading journals analyzed, including the time lines reviewed.

Several factors have an effect on business sustainability. Cantele and Zardini (2020) examined factors that drive SMEs to sustainability. Cantele and Zardini showed various factors influencing small and medium business leaders towards sustainability practices; however, there are varying outcomes and gaps in these reports. Cantele and Zardini proposed the need for innovative approaches to understanding the relationships among these sustainability drivers. Cantele and Zardini hypothesized and examined a model in which the flow of decisions from SME leaders is represented as a multistep process driven firstly by internal and external pressures from two opposing forces. The two opposing forces are the positive impact from perceived benefits of sustainability and the negative impact of perceived impediments of sustainability if implemented (Cantele & Zardini, 2020). Using data from an Italian SMEs' survey and through structural modeling analysis, Cantele and Zardini confirmed the hypotheses of a mediated way of influence. Cantele and Zardini identified the impact of various factors on prospective business and policy-making decisions that may enhance or hinder sustainability in SMEs. The opposite forces that influence sustainability decision-making by SMEs' business leaders may impact the lack of consistency in its implementation across the board (Cantele & Zardini, 2020). Cantele and Zardini confirmed the hypotheses of a mediated path of influence, thus highlighting the different roles of factors that enable and block sustainability in SMEs, with prospective business and policy-making implications in the light of the pursuit of The United Nation's recommended sustainable development goals.

Cantele and Zardini proposed that the study's findings can assist SME business owners, and potentially other public policy makers, in gaining a deeper understanding of the complex set of elements that influence their decision-making about sustainability adoption. The study can also be useful by nonprofit business leaders in adopting sustainability practices to maintain financial sustainability during economic downturns. However, Candeled and Zardini acknowledged the limitations in validity of the study's findings, which are primarily attributable to the specific sample on which the method is based, thus they suggested that additional research could be devoted to validating the model in other countries or with companies of various sizes.

A correlation exists between sustainability management strategies and firms' financial performance constructs. Sroufe and Gopalakrishna-Remani (2019) examined the way innovative organizations incorporate sustainability into practice to improve financial performance. Sroufe and Gopalakrishna-Remani used a sample from Fortune 500 firms listed concurrently in the Newsweek's green ranking, the Corporate Knights Global 100 ranking, and the 100 Best Corporate Citizens lists. Based on their analysis, Sroufe and Gopalakrishna-Remani found a positive correlation between sustainability management strategies and firms' financial performance constructs (Sroufe & Gopalakrishna-Remani, 2019). Sroufe and Gopalakrishna-Remani acknowledged the development of constructs and findings within this study as the management of sustainability practices favorable impacting social sustainability performance. However, Sroufe and Gopalakrishna-Remani suggested that a lack of social sustainability influencing a company's financial performance and reputation necessitates greater

communication and comprehension of material social sustainability practices, which should include external and internal stakeholders, value chains, and end customers. The key weakness identified in the study involved the limited cross-sector investigation warranting future research to involve examining larger cross-sector samples.

### ***Business/Corporate – Nonprofit Strategic Partnerships***

Some nonprofit business leaders use strategic partnerships, such as CSR programs, earned income and hybrid social ventures, and fiscal sponsorship to maintain financial sustainability. According to some scholars and practitioners, there are strong mutual benefits for both corporate and nonprofit partnerships, particularly through CSR programs (Maktoufi et al., 2020; Remund & McKeever, 2018; Shumate et al., 2018). However, there is limited public information about the mutual benefits for the fiscal sponsors and their respective partners, as compared to CSR partnership agreements, warranting further investigation (Anderssen & Neely, 2019).

Creating fit communications have more tendency to influence stakeholders' evaluation of the corporate-nonprofit alignment. Maktoufi et al. (2020) provided an in-depth analysis of the complex corporate-nonprofit relationships, CSR fit messages, and stakeholder assessments. Using an online experiment of 966 samples through the synergy sustainability model, Maktoufi et al. tested the CSR fit messages' impact on the perception of stakeholders. Maktoufi et al. found that created fit communications have more tendency to influence stakeholders' evaluation of the corporate-nonprofit alignment. Based on the findings by Maktoufi et al., scholars and practitioners may further assess the role of effective communications in achieving a competitive edge

through CSR programs, especially during economic shocks, for financial sustainability for nonprofits. CSR programs are useful tools in impacting social change if, as Maktoufi et al. found, stakeholders have positive assessments of both parties in the community. Maktoufi et al. offered practical implications to corporate nonprofit partnerships and created fit management communication in optimizing strategies for business or financial sustainability, which include (a) even reasonably brief created fit messages improve stakeholder evaluations of partnership fit across conditions; thus, this may be good news for corporations with modest communication budgets as well as for nonprofits whose funds are dedicated to their mission instead of communication works; (b) similarly, that created fit messaging was especially compelling for indeterminate partnerships; thus, presented with multiple corporate-nonprofit partnership potential, this finding implies that firms are not restricted to partnerships with naturally occurring high levels of fit in order to obtain the positive stakeholder assessments; and (c) when activist stakeholders are the target audience and the partnership is indefinite, created fit messaging is most impactful. However, there were some differences identified in the created fit messaging effectiveness depending on the various partnerships that may potentially impact the generality and validity of the findings (Maktoufi et al., 2020). The potential limitations identified by Maktoufi et al. are as follows: (a) the study concentrated on the responses of women in the United States, thus research that involves a wider population sample would provide valuable comparative data that could present information about how various sections of the population feedback to created-fit messages about corporate–nonprofit partnerships; (b) research that investigates stakeholders' perceptions based on location;

and (c) research that investigate interested parties' viewpoints of corporate–nonprofit partnerships.

Business-nonprofits partnerships share common values and mutual commitment in achieving common goals. Remund and McKeever (2018) investigated some top-ranked nonprofits based in the United States, Europe, and South America with CSR programs for insights about their strategic partnerships with business entities. Remund and McKeever identified that the leaders in business-nonprofits partnerships shared common values and mutual commitment in achieving common goals. Although researchers in the field of CSR programs, including Shumate et al. (2018), agreed that more research studies are warranted to confirm business-nonprofits connectivity with sustainability, there is growing support of potential positive impacts of CRS strategy on nonprofits sustainability. Shumate et al. studied recognizable U.S.-based nonprofits to gain an in-depth understanding of the symbiotic sustainability model through partnerships with Fortune 500 corporations. Shumate et al. found, contrary to previous research, that leading nonprofits reported more business-nonprofits connections or partnerships than reported by their Fortune 500 counterparts and suggested adopting the practices as financial sustainability strategies. Despite the potential implications, Remund and McKeever (2018) argued that qualitative research does not produce objective, quantifiable data that can be generalized; consequently, the results of the study are limited in their applicability and cannot be extended to the entire universe of corporations, nonprofit organizations, and/or CSR collaborations worldwide, or even in the United States.

More public disclosure is needed, as required from fiscal sponsors, particularly regarding partnerships with smaller entities to understand the important role of fiscal sponsorship. Andersson and Neely (2019) explored the way nonprofits report their fiscal sponsorship activities to the public and the extent to which potential partners are aware of these strategic partnership capabilities. In reviewing 74 publicly disclosed information of fiscal sponsors, Andersson and Neely found that most fiscal sponsors disclosed their activities neither on form 990 nor on their websites for public records. Andersson and Neely found that more public disclosure is needed, as required from fiscal sponsors, particularly regarding partnerships with smaller entities to understand the important role of fiscal sponsorship. While fiscal sponsorship, as a social entrepreneurship model, can play a vital role as a financial sustainability strategy, fiscal sponsorship could serve the social needs of the community (Andersson & Neely, 2019). Similar to the CSR strategy, the symbiotic leadership responsibility between the nonprofits and their respective partners should provide the opportunity for ensuring accountability and transparency. Andersson and Neely's (2019) findings are very useful because they shed light on the potential benefits and lack of public information about such an important management strategic tool used to provide essential social programs in their communities. Andersson and Neely stated some practical implications of their study's results are as follows: (a) the sponsor organization can acquire, sometimes, quite significant unrestricted earned revenue, by sharing the administrative function across various nonprofit entrepreneurs, thus fiscal sponsorship establishes a mutually beneficial partnership that not only helps nonprofit entrepreneurs but also supports the fiscal sponsor maintain or develop

administrative (or other types of) capacity such as achieving financial sustainability; (b) provide policy-makers and regulators insights on potential public disclosure mechanisms for reporting fiscal sponsorship activities; and (c) current and future scholars and practitioners will also be able to use the data provided to help improve their reporting policies. However, one of the key limitations Anderssen and Neely emphasized is the lack of full disclosure of sponsorship activities that can reduce its usefulness and validity.

Youth social entrepreneurs need more support including marketing to help make the world a better place. Bublitz et al.'s (2021) research study focused on 20 established youth social entrepreneurs to explore the way the dynamic ecosystem in social impact initiatives empower them to rise up as social change agents to improve communities, people, and the betterment of the future. Bublitz et al. confirmed the need for more research and outreach in social entrepreneurship and strategic partnerships for solving societal issues. The implications of Bublitz et al.'s research study include proving stakeholders with the sustainability strategies and framework for solving current and future societal problems. Bublitz et al. suggested the importance of using the findings to better understand and develop effective youth ecosystems in making the world a better place. The development of youth social entrepreneurship ecosystems is critical in achieving the sustainable solutions of society, economic, and environmental concerns of our communities and improving the world (Bublitz et al., 2021). Bublitz et al.'s concluded that recognizing the negative impacts of some influencers and lack of access to important resources for youth social entrepreneurs to enhance their confidence, personal agency, and self-efficacy, can pose major constrains in the self-reporting provided and

consequently affect the findings validity; therefore, they will need more support including marketing to help make the world a better place.

Nonprofit fiscal sponsorship plays a vital role in providing a platform for social impact initiatives, particularly smaller startups to grow. Cates and Howard (2019) used four case studies to investigate the manner in which a newly founded nonprofit used a strategic partnership approach, such as fiscal sponsorship, during startup due to economic hardships. Farm to School, a startup in Park County, Montana, had to choose whether to go as an independent nonprofit or hire a fiscal sponsor with established administrative capabilities to help them move forward (Cates & Howard, 2019). Cates and Howard found that the strategic partnership decisions made by the leadership of a farm-to-school program facilitated the proper and successful establishment of an independent organization. The implication of this study is that scholars and practitioners have very strong practical examples of how strategic partnerships of a startup from program to an independent stage were developed (Cates & Howard, 2019). However, Cates and Howard acknowledged it is not very clear the transferability of the strategy to all sectors and more cross-sector research, including longitudinal methodologies over-time, and proper public information disclosures are warranted for validation. The findings of Cates and Howard's study are useful because they supported the vital role nonprofit fiscal sponsorship plays in providing a platform for social impact initiatives, particularly smaller startups to grow. In addition, public awareness of fiscal sponsorship provides more opportunities for inclusion in providing social services to communities.



### ***Financial Management Practices***

Due to the current rapidly changing nonprofit budgetary constraints, business leaders must become innovative in financial sustainability practices to meet their mission goals. Some of the common key emerging financial management strategies adopted by nonprofit leaders to survive economic hardships include (a) cost reduction, (b) debt avoidance, (c) financial reserves, (d) income diversification, (e) revenue determinant factors, (f) revenue compositions, and (g) expanding new networks and strategic partnerships (Cheng & Yang, 2019; Cortis & Lee, 2019; Kim & Mason, 2020; Mitchell & Calabrese, 2019; Rottkamp, 2021; Skandrani et al., 2021; Sumanasiri, 2020).

**Conventional/Traditional Strategies.** Conventional or traditional practices and assumptions in the nonprofit financial management, mainly cost reduction, debt avoidance, financial reserves, and income diversification, have attracted very limited research interest. In the following research studies, I review some of the conventional or traditional financial management strategies found in the literature nonprofit leaders use in maintaining financial sustainability during economic crises.

Cheng and Yang (2019) identified and added to the understanding of the previous studies that have mostly considered government-nonprofit relationships as income streams for nonprofit organizations without any significant empirical research towards governmental funding changes and their impact on public services affected. Cheng and Yang used a distinctive panel data set of pack-facilitating nonprofits in 150 large U.S. cities to quantitatively investigate public services' nonprofits adjusting their financial management strategies towards government funding cuts without depending too heavily

on the government to maintain services. Cheng and Yang suggested an increase in fund-raising efforts and diversification of revenue portfolio in responding to incremental government expenditure changes.

When faced with drastic budget cuts, Cheng and Yang found the public service nonprofit's likely response included cutting administrative costs and spending more on the needed public services to fill the gaps. Cheng and Yang concluded that nonprofits do not usually borrow and use financial reserves when faced with drastic government cuts or financial shocks. Cheng and Yang provided additional empirical perspectives about some nonprofits and local governments joining together to leverage limited resources to meet public services needs of their community. However, one key limitation identified as opposing viewpoint of the study's findings is that nonprofits in rural public services areas may not have the same facilities as compared to large cities to meet their public services mission (Cheng & Yang, 2019). Furthermore, the implication of this study may encourage more clarity and policy-making decisions for public, nonprofits, and other private sectors to form stronger partnerships in meeting community needs (Cheng & Yang, 2019). Generally, most local governments are risk-averse due to limited resources, but well-researched public services financial management strategies may open more doors for more community development readiness and opportunities.

A high dependency on governmental funding sources by nonprofits generally leads to a high risk of collapsing or lowering the quality of public programs delivery. Cortis and Lee (2019) conducted a quantitative study to explore the financial reserves of 4,542 Australian charities relative to countries, such as the United States, in providing

government programs to understand the financial management practices during financial crises. Although there is a general perception of funding stability for nonprofits with government partnerships, Cortis and Lee identified that various factors, including diverse funding sources, nonprofit sizes, liberal welfare policies, and other financial reserves' capabilities play key roles that impact the financial management practices and sustainability of many charities in providing critical government programs. Cortis and Lee found that a high dependency on governmental funding sources by nonprofits generally leads to a high risk of collapsing or lowering the quality of public programs delivery. Cortis and Lee recommended that effectively managing the financial reserves of nonprofits with a governmental partnership is an important strategy in maintaining the financial sustainability by nonprofit leaders, especially in delivering mandated public charitable services. In addition, nonprofits of various sizes and types should seek other nongovernmental sources, such as philanthropic and earned incomes, to maintain financial sustainability (Cortis & Lee, 2019). Finally, Cortis and Lee's findings contributed to policy planning in the nonprofits in the public sector.

Nonetheless, Cortis and Lee (2019) pointed out a number of limitations that may inhibit the applicability and validity of their findings: (a) they used cross-sectional data for a single year and examined a single measure of financial status, providing a relatively narrow point-in-time evaluation; (b) the analysis of the measure or other accounting ratios does not allow for a comprehensive examination of the range of historical and structural drivers of financial vulnerability; (c) information gathered about organizational forms and actions may not adequately capture their diversity, such that undiscovered

characteristics of charities, as well as their financial condition and leaders' perspectives, may support charities' financial strategy in relation to reserves; (d) they did not examine charities' non-current assets and longer-term financial capacity, so the findings may be influenced by different structures of asset holding among various types of charities; and (e) nor did they investigate direct exposure to dependable donors, the reliability of government contracts, or other income sources, which may provide organizations with a measure of assurance in the absence of liquid assets; consequently, future studies showing more detailed information of charity finances and strategy and examining mixes of short-term and long-term risk would assist in overcoming these limitations.

A direct financial impact of operating reserves on most nonprofits' financial sustainability occurs during economic downturns. Kim and Mason (2020) found that the COVID-19 pandemic severely impacted most nonprofits and provided an opportunity to examine financial management strategies, particularly by maintaining operating reserves. Utilizing actual survey data from over 600 nonprofits in the human services and art organizations, Kim and Mason identified a direct financial impact of operating reserves on most nonprofits' financial sustainability during economic downturns. The implications of Kim and Mason's study are important to social change because most nonprofits do not implement operating reserves as part of sound financial management strategies in maintaining financial sustainability. The reluctance or inability to develop adequate reserves by some nonprofits is due to pressure not to feel too wealthy as nonprofit and the lack of understanding by nonprofit funders, as incentives or motivation, to develop reserves (Kim & Mason, 2020). However, Kim and Mason acknowledged some

limitations of findings as follows: (a) in an evolving economic climate, they were only capable of collecting a glimpse of executive viewpoints at a single point in time, which was just over two weeks at the outbreak's onset for assured data reliability; and (b) notwithstanding using weighted sampling, their findings cannot be without self-selection prejudices and should not be extrapolated to all human service and arts nonprofits.

Traditional practices and assumptions in the nonprofit financial management has received very limited scrutiny, as compared to the public administration sector for possible reforms. Mitchell and Calabrese (2019) identified that research studies in the past several decades confirmed accumulated findings about problems with the traditional assumptions and practices. Mitchell and Calabrese suggested the soundness of the nomothetic management theory, some management norms with unintended negative consequences, and the fundamental assumptions about the intent and essence of the nonprofit management sector must be reevaluated. Mitchell and Calabrese thoroughly examined four well-known strategies of nonprofit financial management, including (a) reducing overhead, (b) diversifying revenues, (c) spending cuts, and (d) avoiding debt to prove the critical and reflective research program needed. Mitchell and Calabrese identified maintaining trustworthiness as the most essential challenge found in contemporary financial management practices. Mitchell and Calabrese found conventional financial management practices and assumptions are still important; however, scholars and practitioners need new approaches to improve the trustworthiness of financial information to achieve desired social impact. The use of new advanced

information systems and other technologies will play critical roles in maintaining accountability and transparency in nonprofit financial management.

Mitchell and Calabrese (2019) identified some key contrasting viewpoints in their findings concerning the investigated conventional nonprofit financial management models as follows: (a) as a proxy for the efficiency and effectiveness of an organization, overhead lacks both predictive (empirical) and construct (logical) validity due to the fact that cost percentages do not take success of the program into account, (b) depending on an organizational objectives and circumstances, the implications of revenue diversification are complicated and context-dependent, and it might or might not be advantageous, (c) as with administrative expenses, reserve buildup seems to contradict conventional norms that associate fiscal austerity with organizational wisdom and truthfulness, and (d) as with administrative expenses and reserve buildup, debt repayments is a common diversion of resources from existing programs that can damage a nonprofit's public image and credibility; in contrast, because many nonprofits have insufficient operating reserves to survive recessions and other exogenous shocks to their revenue sources, debt capacity is a crucial (though imperfect) mechanism for sustaining program stability during economic downturns.

**Contemporary Innovations and Strategies.** Although traditional financial management strategies are still important for scholars and practitioners in current dynamic economic environments, some researchers argued that there is a need for critical look and continuous innovative approaches in addressing financial sustainability during economic crises (Mitchell & Calabrese, 2019). In the following research studies, I discuss

some of the contemporary approaches in literature, such as collaborations through expanding new networks and strategic partnerships, and the innovations of some conventional strategies, including revenue determinant factors and revenue compositions, used by nonprofits to maintain financial sustainability during economic downturns.

An increasing interest based on public-management literature regarding nonprofits and public collaborations exists; however, further scrutiny about the sustainability of collaborations is warranted. The intentions behind collaborations by nonprofits with the government include both instrumental and relational elements (Peng et al., 2020a). Utilizing a national sample of nonprofit organizations in the human services sector, Peng et al. found both continuance commitment, which is driven by commitment to formal agreement and dependency on government funding, and affective commitment, shaped by distributive and procedural justice, influence the collaborative desire by nonprofits with government.

A unique perspective of relational and justice approaches in collaboration, as compared to the commonly known general dependency theory. Peng et al. (2020a) found the strengths of nonprofits applying these types of collaborations may help avoid becoming heavily dependent on the government funding and thereby become more independent and sustainable, even during financial shocks. The major limitation identified as potential caution in full validation included the political environment in dealing with sensitive public services information and persons' providing public affairs (Peng et al., 2020a). Peng et al. suggested further understanding will impact the ways

public managers effectively collaborate with nonprofits in the public services spaces for mutually beneficial relationship.

Nonprofits that have survived or will survive the COVID-19 pandemic and future uncertainties are those with (a) reimaged mission, (b) strategic vision, and (c) sustainability plans. Rottkamp (2021) suggested nonprofit leaders that have been willing and able to quickly adapt and innovate new strategies have demonstrated the need for new thinking in the nonprofit sector for sustainability. Rottkamp identified new strategies for survival, including (a) realigning programmatic strategies, (b) adapting technology, (c) identifying new revenue sources, (d) enhancing networks, (e) re-envisioning reality to prepare uncertain times, and (f) forging new partnerships with other organizations. Rottkamp provided a very thorough and useful assessment for scholars, practitioners, and various stakeholders in the field of nonprofit management in preparing for uncertainties. Rottkamp suggested the findings will have an impact on social change because of growing interest by nonprofit leaders in embracing innovative ways to continue providing public services. Rottkamp acknowledged that, although the pandemic is an extreme illustration of the need to reexamine programming and match it with demand during difficult times, global crises are not the only occasions that necessitate evaluations which may be time-bound or limited in its usefulness; rather, a nonprofit's financial sustainability is directly tied to its capacity to continuously fulfill its citizens' and society's demands and necessities - all of which are constantly changing.

Factors impeding nonprofit organizations' activities and survival should be examined. Using semistructured interviews, Skandrani et al. (2021) carried out a



purposive sample of 32 nonprofit organizations' members in two main economic and touristic cities in Tunisia, named Tunis and Sousse, which were chosen using the snowball method. Skandrani et al. created a considerable amount of qualitative data from 400 pages of literature review. Skandrani et al.'s data collection was made possible due to the recent freedom of speech acquired after the civil uprising in 2011, as interviewees were inspired to express their opinions. Skandrani et al. found two key categories of inhibitors, which are endogenous and exogenous. Endogenous inhibitors include (a) inhibitors under the control of the nonprofit organizations, such as the use of illegal and foreign sources of funding; (b) limited financial resources; (c) unavailability of nonprofit organizations' members; (d) short term planning; (e) conflicts between managers; (f) autocratic leadership; (g) organizational support; (h) activities diversification and organizational justice; (i) leadership and communication skills; (j) "nonprofit organizations' culture"; (k) members' opportunistic behavior; (l) generation gap; and (m) inhibitors related to nonprofit organizations' inter-relationships, which are stiff competition, unfair and dishonest competition, lack of collaboration, trust, and communication between nonprofit organizations. Exogenous inhibitors are as follows: (a) perceived unethical practices and image transfer, (b) economic crisis, (c) foreign funding sources, and (d) the media. Skandrani et al. acknowledged the research environment, including data gathered only in two places (Tunis and Sousse), sample characteristics and assumptions made, may undermine its dependability, generalizability, and validity. Skandrani et al. identified there are limitations and counterpoints about the mediators and conditions that promote effective nonprofit organizations' collaborations in achieving

financial sustainability; thus, their study aimed to highlight to the international community some of the humanitarian crises confronted by nonprofits and may attract more generalizability studies in relief support.

Various concepts related to organizational sustainability and its evolution should be examined. To achieve these objectives, Sumanasiri (2020) examined more than 150 peer-reviewed journal articles related to organizational sustainability that were published between 1987 and 2020. Sumanasiri confirmed that there were diverse meanings of organizational sustainability, and that organizational sustainability is in the process of evolution. Sumanasiri suggested the relevance of stakeholder engagement in sustainability-related decision-making at the organizational level. Sumanasiri found that long-term outlook has become a key concern when implementing sustainability in organizations; however, it has become one of the main sources of concern for organizational leadership in the current state as well. Sumanasiri identified in the literature review that national cultural values and organizational culture influence leadership decisions related to organizational sustainability. Sumanasiri suggested that there are no best solutions or strategies in attaining organizational sustainability, therefore business leaders should apply holistic points of view and create innovative solutions to address sustainability issues unique to their own organizations. Sumanasiri argued that future studies should be directed towards deeper knowledge about organizational sustainability in a context-specific manner rather than utilizing a generalized method. Sumanasiri concluded that the social change implication includes the important contribution to policymaking in understanding factors influencing nonprofit leaders in

providing public services. However, Sumanasiri's suggestion for future studies and practices to focus on context-specific organizational sustainability development is in contrast with some researchers. For example, Skandrani et al. (2021) proposed more generalized approaches and collaborations among nonprofit organizations and stakeholders to enhance organizational sustainability.

### **Transition**

Section 1 included the problem statement, purpose statement, and the nature of the study to support the selection of a qualitative methodology and a case study design for this study. In Section 1, I also presented the interview questions; operational definitions; and assumptions, limitations, and delimitations for the study. The last two components of Section 1 are the significance of the study and a review of the professional academic literature. In the literature review, I presented a comprehensive analysis of research relevant to financial sustainability strategies and other related topics researchers use to gain an exhaustive understanding of the research topic.

In Section 2, I will provide a restatement of the purpose of the study. Then, I will present the following subsection: role of the researcher, participants, population and sampling, and ethical research. Additionally, I provide a justification of the research method and design and discuss my plans for data collection, organization, and analysis. I will conclude Section 2 with a description of reliability and validity. Section 3 will include the following subsections: (a) the introduction, (b) a presentation of the findings, (c) the application to professional practice, (d) implications for social change, (e)

recommendations for action, (f) recommendations for further study, (g) reflections, and  
(h) conclusion.

## Section 2: The Project

In this section, I provide a restatement of the purpose of the study. Then, I present the following subsections: role of the researcher, participants, population and sampling, and ethical research. Additionally, I provide a justification of the research method and designed and discuss my plans for data collection, organization, and analysis. I conclude Section 2 with a description of reliability and validity.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies that some nonprofit business leaders use to maintain financial sustainability during economic downturns. The sample consisted of four business leaders from four different nonprofits in the State of Wisconsin with successful strategies to maintain financial sustainability during economic downturns. The implications for positive social change include the potential for nonprofit leaders to learn how to revise their financing models to sustain and improve their organizations during economic downturns, thereby enabling these organizations to improve the socioeconomic condition of historically under-served communities' citizens.

### **Role of the Researcher**

Pather and Remenyi (2019) identified that the role of the researcher entails six tasks: networking, collaboration, managing research, conducting research, publishing research, and evaluating research. As the primary data collection instrument, I was in charge of all phases of the study, including concept definition, data collection from multiple sources, completion of interviews, transcription of interviews, analysis of data,

and development of codes and themes, as Windsong (2018) recommended. Creswell and Poth (2018) recommended the use of multiple data sources, including semistructured interviews and organizational documents and artifacts. I conducted semistructured interviews and reviewed organizational documents and artifacts in order to collect data for this study from a variety of sources.

My past background as a nonprofit professional for 18 years enabled me to have a realistic view of a diverse range of nonprofits and the strategies they used to maintain financial sustainability during economic downturns. Working with nonprofit leaders broadened my perspective on a number of scenarios and issues. I used my experience in nonprofits to develop interview questions in a way that possible answers may have helped answer this study's overarching research question. Knowing nonprofit leaders allowed me to purposefully identify potential participants for this study.

In the form of rules, standards, and regulations enforced by professional groups and review boards, ethical issues that researchers should consider when doing social research are widely available (Babchuk, 2019). Researchers have a moral obligation to perform their study ethically (Adashi et al., 2018) and in accordance with the *Belmont Report* protocol's standards (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). The three fundamental ethical principles governing human subjects research are *respect for persons*, *beneficence*, and *justice* (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). While researchers adhering to the principle of *respect for persons* recognize participants' autonomy, researchers must also understand that some

participants may have limited autonomy. I recognized participants' autonomy and remembered that some participants may possess limited autonomy. The *beneficence* principle relates to the requirement that researchers must do no harm to participants while increasing benefits of the research study (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). I ensured that I did not do harm to participants while increasing the benefits of this study. Following the *justice* principle, researchers must treat participants equitably and fairly in terms of the research study's prospective benefits and burdens (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). I treated participants equitably and fairly regarding the benefits and burdens of this study.

The protocol for the *Belmont Report* offers guidance to researchers on effective ways to apply ethical principles. This application of principles is concerned with obtaining informed consent, assessing risks and benefits, and selecting subjects. The section related to informed consent is particularly noteworthy because researchers must disclose information to participants and ensure that participants understand the research process, including the fact that their participation is completely voluntary and the option to withdraw from the study at any stage without providing a reason (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). As the researcher, I strictly adhered to (a) the *Belmont Report* protocol's ethical standards, (b) the Institutional Review Board's (IRB) requirements, and (c) any additional ethical requirements of the organizations that participated in this study. I did not begin the research investigation until I received authorization from the IRB. One

strategy to ensure the ethicality of my research study was to explain the informed consent principle to participants and obtain their consent via email before conducting the Zoom interviews. Following IRB requirements, I was fair in treating all participants and informed participants that (a) their participation was strictly voluntary, (b) they could withdraw at any time without any negative consequences, and (c) their confidentiality was protected.

Difficulties in avoiding bias during the study process exist (Jacobson & Mustafa, 2019), as researchers may be tempted to choose evidence that supports their underlying opinions (Johnson et al., 2019). Researchers cautioned other researchers against adding a new type of bias to eradicate a previously identified bias. Researchers incorporate member checking into the design of their research to eliminate biases (Johnson et al., 2019). By using member checking, participants can review the researcher's interpretations of participants' responses to interview questions to verify the accuracy of such interpretations (Iivari, 2018; Johnson et al., 2019). I engaged in member checking by providing my interpretations of participants' responses to interview questions and requesting confirmation from participants that my interpretations were accurate. By carefully documenting the study's assumptions and limitations, I provided the reader with information to evaluate the study's reliability and validity.

Researchers use an interview protocol to guide them through the interview process (Báez et al., 2020; Creswell & Poth, 2018). An interview protocol contains important information related to the procedures that will be used in the interview, a script to be used in the introduction and closing of the interview, prompts used to gain informed



consent from study participants, and the interview questions that will be used in the study (Báez et al., 2020; Creswell & Poth, 2018). I used an interview protocol (see the appendix) to aid and guide me through the interview process and to guarantee that I shared the same information with all participants consistently.

### **Participants**

Researchers start by first finding appropriate study participants before beginning data collecting (Hamilton, 2020). Researchers must align the study's overarching research question with participants' eligibility criteria (Brown et al., 2018). Identifying an appropriate organization and gaining entry to that organization are among the obstacles that researchers must overcome (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Additional difficulties researchers must overcome are obtaining individuals' consent to partake fully in the interview process (Hamilton, 2020). Participation requirements for involvement in a research study are the characteristics, such as age, length of work, and leadership level, researchers use to determine if potential participants are suitable for participation (Brown et al., 2018). Study participants must possess knowledge and experience regarding the phenomena under study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

I used purposeful sampling because it allowed me to screen the participant population by selecting only those individuals who met the established participation criteria in order to collect valuable data. The participation criteria were nonprofit business leaders possessing at least 15 years of experience using strategies to maintain financial sustainability during economic downturns, allowing them to survive the Great Recession of 2008-09. Using public background information, such as LinkedIn, other credible social

media, and company websites prior to meeting, I contacted each participant purposefully selected and asked if they had used strategies to remain financially sustainable during economic downturns. In addition, if the participant's organization survived economic downturns, it may be an indication that the participant used successful strategies.

Researchers must align the study's overarching research question with the eligibility criteria for participants (Brown et al., 2018). I purposively selected four individuals working in four different 501(c)(3) nonprofits in the State of Wisconsin to participate in this study. Participants possessed at least 15 years of experience using strategies to maintain financial sustainability during economic downturns, allowing them to survive the Great Recession of 2008-09. Due to the wide variety of experiences and knowledge levels these individuals have accumulated while working with nonprofits, they were suitable for involvement in this study.

Researchers face challenges associated with identifying suitable organizations and gaining access to participants (FitzPatrick, 2019). To face these challenges successfully, FitzPatrick (2019) recommended that researchers engage with important organizational individuals, use a variety of recruitment strategies, and know the target audience. Collaborating with important organizational individuals was an appropriate strategy to identify suitable organizations and participants because I shared with them my desire to conduct this study at their organization.

Additionally, researchers must earn the approval and trust of research study participants. Researchers build trust with participants to gather quality data (McGrath et al., 2019). Frequent interaction with individuals is one approach for acquiring

participants' trust and fostering relationships (McGrath et al., 2019). I interacted frequently with participants to enable me to earn their trust and approval, which facilitated the collection of rich data.

By adopting a suitable research design, researchers align the participants with the study's central research question (Elliott-Sale et al., 2021). Researchers must answer the study's central research question by recruiting individuals possessing knowledge and expertise directly related to the phenomenon under scrutiny (Elliott-Sale et al., 2021). I answered the study's central research question by recruiting individuals possessing knowledge and expertise directly related to the phenomenon under scrutiny (see Strijker et al., 2020).

## **Research Method and Design**

### **Research Method**

There are three primary methods to conduct a research study, which are qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods (Strijker et al., 2020). Researchers use the qualitative method to explore an issue or a problem by allowing participants to express their experiences and to mitigate potential bias between participants and researchers during studies (Kohler et al., 2019). Accordingly, the qualitative method was the appropriate research approach for this study because I explored strategies that some nonprofit business leaders use to maintain financial sustainability during economic downturns, allowing participants to express their experiences. Qualitative researchers identify current trends in concepts and views and dig into the theme of problem or research for in-depth comprehension (Silva dos Santos, 2018).

Researchers use the quantitative method to explain a phenomenon or an outcome by examining the relationships among variables through interpretation of empirical data collected from individuals or groups through reliable instruments' scales (Abutabenjeh, 2018). I did not examine the relationships among variables and interpreting empirical data; therefore, the quantitative method was not appropriate. I did not select the quantitative method because I did not use hypothesis examination in my study, which is only applicable in quantitative or mixed methodology investigations (Neal Kimball & Turner, 2018). The mixed-method approach includes using both qualitative and quantitative methods (Neal Kimball & Turner, 2018). The mixed-method strategy entails the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data to address the research question when the study requires one method to inform or clarify the other (Almeida, 2018). I did not include the quantitative method in my exploration of strategies nonprofit business leaders use to maintain sustainability; therefore, a mixed-method approach was not suitable for this study.

### **Research Design**

Based on my objective to explore strategies that some nonprofit business leaders use to maintain financial sustainability during economic downturns, the exploratory multiple case study design was appropriate for this study. According to Sykes et al. (2018), researchers use the case study design to provide in-depth analysis and description of a real-life phenomenon through a collection of multiple sources of information, such as interviews, artifacts, documents and reports, and observations. I selected the multiple case study design over the single case study because Maher et al. (2018) suggested that

the multiple case study is a more rigorous design. In a single case study design, a researcher focuses on studying a specific individual, group, or case as a unit for in-depth analysis (Maher et al., 2018). In a multiple case study, researchers investigate two or more units of cases to explore differences or similarities (Maher et al., 2018). In addition, Roberts et al. (2019) suggested a multiple case study design could assist a qualitative researcher to include various sources of data to provide a complete analysis and description of complex research problems in a real-life context.

I considered other qualitative research designs, including ethnographic and phenomenological methods. A researcher uses an ethnographic design to conduct direct and long-term social interactions with participants to observe and understand a cultural phenomenon (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018; Dogan et al., 2019). The ethnographic design was unsuitable for my research because I investigated the techniques that nonprofit business leaders have implemented, and not the reasons for their implementation or the cultural attitudes and behaviors of the participants. Researchers use the phenomenological design to study in-depth meaning of lived experiences of participants (Larkin et al., 2018). In the phenomenological design, researchers attempt to evaluate opinions, attitudes, and comprehension that participants have of a variety of scenarios (Larkin et al., 2018). I used interviews, documents and reports, artifacts, and reliable secondary records without close observations or lived experience exploration. Therefore, the ethnographic and phenomenological designs were not appropriate for this study.

Researchers reach data saturation when they collect and analyze additional data, but no new information or themes emerge (Saunders et al., 2018). Researchers unable to

reach data saturation may not obtain conclusive findings (Saunders et al., 2018). The member checking process includes offering participants the researchers' interpretation of participants' responses to interview questions and requesting that participants confirm the exactness of these interpretations (DeCino & Waalkes, 2019). I conducted member checking by giving participants my interpretations of their answers to interview questions and asking participants to verify the accuracy of such interpretations. If I had not reached data saturation with four participants, I would have continued interviewing participants until no new meaningful information or themes had emerged.

### **Population and Sampling**

Choosing the suitable sampling technique is crucial for enhancing the credibility of a study (Berndt, 2020). Purposeful sampling is important for tapering participant populations by guaranteeing that all respondents satisfy the same list of criteria, hence shedding light on a problem (Bhardwaj, 2019). Purposeful sampling entails the identification and selection of participants meeting the established criteria for participation in a research study (Bhardwaj, 2019). I used purposeful sampling because it enabled me to screen the participant population by choosing only those individuals meeting the established participation criteria to collect valuable data.

I gathered data from four business leaders from four different 501(c)(3) nonprofits in the State of Wisconsin with successful strategies to maintain financial sustainability during economic downturns, allowing them to survive the Great Recession of 2008-09. Researchers identify sample size based on the exploratory character of the investigation and the required level of depth of the data (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022), and transferability

to a wider population, consisting of at least one case study (Maxwell, 2021). Guest et al. (2020) proposed that four to five participants are adequate for a case study, and according to Maxwell (2021), study participants must be subject matter experts in the phenomenon under investigation in order to further past research. In case study research, identifying the right sample size is challenging (Leedy & Ormrod, 2019). Nonetheless, Leedy and Ormrod (2019) recommended two or three duplicates are sufficient for the case study research design. If I had not attained data saturation after interviewing four participants, I would have continued conducting interviews until I would have reached data saturation.

When a researcher can no longer get additional information from research participants, data saturation has occurred (Ames et al., 2019). Conducting four to five semistructured interviews (Guest et al., 2020) and offering in-depth knowledge on a particular phenomenon may result in data saturation (Ames et al., 2019). Using semistructured interviews and open-ended questions, I was able to obtain in-depth experiences directly related to the phenomenon under study from research participants, resulting in data saturation. I continued to interview participants until no new meaningful information or themes emerged, which signaled to me that I have reached data saturation. I invited by email qualified participants to acquire their consent for participation in this study.

In this research, it was crucial that the interviewing environment was appropriate for honest and open communication. Ensuring comfort to participants minimizes their nervousness (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019) and promotes an environment conducive to creating trust through rich conversations that lead to building rapport with participants

(Brown & Danaher, 2019). Researchers also recommend conducting interviews in a setting that is not noisy, open to the public, or unpleasant to the participant (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). I chose an interview setting that promoted honest and open communication, and the interviews took place via Zoom. I ensured that the interview setting also adhered to the *Belmont Report* protocol's ethical standards and the Institutional Review Board's (IRB) requirements at Walden University. Additionally, I made the interview comfortable for research interviewees in order to reduce their nervousness and create an atmosphere conducive to establishing trust and enhancing communication with them to collect rich data. I informed each participant in this study that the interview will last around 60 minutes. All interviews lasted no more than 60 minutes.

### **Ethical Research**

Obtaining consent is an essential step of every research study (Stier et al., 2020). I requested each interviewee to complete the informed consent form before partaking in my research. Researchers use an informed consent form that includes the nature of the research, participants' anticipations, possible harms, rewards, as well as researchers' contact information in case they have further inquiries (Xu et al., 2020). Various writers have classified the informed consent procedure into two components, comprising the creation of a consent form and the distribution of consent information to study participants (Xu et al., 2020). The informed consent form I adopted was written in plain English to guarantee that interviewees with varied educational backgrounds easily understood the interview questions, as VandeVusse et al. (2022) recommended. When I



found an eligible interviewee, I emailed this person a copy of the informed consent form and explained each item thoroughly. Personalized assessment of informed consent forms is important because not all participants will read the complete document (Zhong et al., 2019).

As suggested by various researchers (Stier et al., 2020), I notified interviewees that taking part in this study was entirely voluntary. Participants are free to withdraw from the research study at any moment with no explanation required (Stier et al., 2020). I advised participants that they might exit from the planned research study at any moment without negative repercussions or explanations. The informed consent form plainly specifies that participants may exit from the research study at any moment, without negative repercussions, by expressing their desire to exit either in verbal or written format. Researchers must protect the confidentiality and privacy of participants (Husband, 2020). Neither during nor after the research process did the participants obtain any material or immaterial reward. If participants gain any material or immaterial incentive, the research study could become biased (Lobe et al., 2020).

I ensured through informed consent forms and emails and other publicly available sources, including social media, that every interviewee was at least 18 years and satisfied all other basic research participation requirements before scheduling interview meetings. Also, because participation criteria were that participants must have at least 15 years of experience, it was reliable to assume they naturally met the minimum age requirement. The interviewing procedure did not begin until I gained approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Walden University. In compliance with the IRB standards of

Walden University, I conducted each interview by prioritizing participants' informed consent and safety. The IRB approval or permission number for this research study at Walden University is 04-11-23-0659184.

I used fictional identities for study participants and their business organizations to protect their privacy and confidentiality. Moreover, the research study did not have any criteria or information that could lead to the indirect identification of participants or their business organizations. A researcher must provide ethical, credible, and useful findings at the completion of a research study while guaranteeing minimum negative repercussions on participants (VandeVusse et al., 2022). I gathered and saved all electronic documentation related to this study in an access-restricted section of my private computer's hard disk during field research and will preserve all tangible documents in a secured cabinet at my home for 5 years before discarding permanently all the stored records. Lastly, in accordance with Walden University IRB's requirements, I shall destroy every study-related electronic and tangible information after the 5-year period elapses.

### **Data Collection Instruments**

Lincoln and Guba (1985) proposed the concept of the researcher as the principal instrument of research in the 1980s. Researchers acknowledge their role as principal research instrument in a qualitative research study (Billups, 2021; Roller, 2019). In their capacity as research instruments, case study researchers acquire various data types through interviewing, observing, and analyzing documents (Alam, 2020; Rashid et al., 2019).

For qualitative research, researchers very frequently utilize semistructured interviews comprising of open-ended questions (Busetto et al., 2020; Peterson, 2019). Researchers comprehend the phenomenon under study from the participants' viewpoints by conducting interviews with participants (Rashid et al., 2019). In conducting semistructured interviews, researchers are able to pose follow-up questions that result in the development of explanatory context (Döringer, 2021). The objective of using semistructured interviews with interviewees is to obtain data from the case organization's experienced professionals regarding the phenomenon under scrutiny (Alam, 2020).

I collected data using semistructured interviews with open-ended questions from State of Wisconsin participants with successful strategies to maintain financial sustainability during economic downturns. I selected study participants using the purposive sampling method. Researchers obtain rich data (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022) by collecting rich, thorough information about the phenomenon under inquiry from study participants. The collection of rich information through semistructured interviews may result in the identification of new data themes (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022; Williams & Moser, 2019). Researchers utilizing semistructured interviews pose preset questions but have the option of asking participants follow-up clarification questions (Nathan et al., 2019; Santhosh et al., 2021). I conducted semistructured interviews with participants and posed questions for clarification purposes to help me collect rich data.

As the principal research instrument of data collection, I conducted, recorded, and transcribed semistructured interviews guided by an interview protocol (see the appendix). As outlined in the interview protocol, participants were asked to respond to all questions

during the semistructured interviews (see appendix). At the conclusion of the interviews, study participants had the chance to share any parting remarks concerning the strategies nonprofit business leaders use to ensure financial sustainability during economic downturns. Requesting closing remarks from participants gives participants the chance to reveal any additional ideas or experiences relevant to the investigated phenomenon that may not have emerged during the interviews (Husband, 2020; Roberts et al., 2019). A researcher will certainly carry bias into a research study (Kohler et al., 2019). Through the practice of researcher reflexivity, researchers counteract this bias (Jacobson & Mustafa, 2019; Johnson et al., 2020). The process through which a researcher thinks on their perspectives and decisions regarding the acquired data is known as researcher reflexivity (Dodgson, 2019; Smith & Luke, 2021). Reflexivity is essential because it tackles potential researcher's biases and increases the transparency of a research study (Dodgson, 2019; Smith & Luke, 2021). To tackle my potential biases, I engaged in reflexivity by thinking on my decisions and views related to the data I gathered and then documented my reflections by writing notes.

The review of organizational documentation and artifacts is an additional technique researchers use to gather data (Vincent & Ogier, 2019; Yin, 2018). In addition to conducting interviews, analyzing organizational documentation and artifacts enables researchers to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under scrutiny (Vincent & Ogier, 2019). Researchers' review of organizational documentation also enhances the robustness of the research study because researchers are able to compare the results of conducting semistructured interviews with the results of reviewing organizational

documentation and artifacts to determine if data alignment occurs, which represents methodological triangulation (He et al., 2019; Segarra-Ciprés et al., 2020). The records that researchers may evaluate include annual reports, budget narratives, and financial statements (Vincent & Ogier, 2019; Yin, 2018). In addition, records may be useful for revealing particular facts regarding the case study, such as the correct spelling of names or event particulars (Awor et al., 2020; Yin, 2018). I analyzed business and fundraising strategies, previous financial records, key management personnel and board members, and any other information related to strategies nonprofit business leaders use to maintain financial sustainability during economic downturns.

Using member checking, researchers enable participants to rectify, validate, enhance, or explain particular aspects of the data obtained, enhancing the validity of the research study (Butler et al., 2021; Johnson et al. 2020; Roberts & Brown, 2019). In member checking, the researchers request that interviewees examine the researchers' interpretations of interviewees' answers to interview questions to confirm the accuracy of such interpretations (Butler et al., 2021). I conducted member checking with participants in this study by asking participants to review my interpretations of their answers to interview questions to ensure the accuracy of my interpretations, increasing the reliability and validity of the data collection instrument in this study.

### **Data Collection Technique**

Utilizing semistructured interviews, researchers acquire participants' perspectives related to the investigated phenomenon (Landstad & Kvangarsners, 2020). Participants deliver an account of their experience with the phenomenon by responding to open-ended

interview questions (Crabtree & Miller, 2022). Researchers utilize the study's central research question to guide the semistructured interviews and ask supplementary questions to elicit extra information about the investigated phenomena (Doringer, 2021; Landstad & Kvangarsnes, 2020). I conducted semistructured interviews with four business leaders from four different 501(c)(3) nonprofits in the State of Wisconsin with successful strategies to maintain financial sustainability during economic downturns.

Complementary to carrying out semistructured interviews, researchers review organizational documents and artifacts associated with the investigated phenomenon (Alpi & Evans, 2019; Mihas, 2019). By utilizing multiple data gathering methods and techniques, researchers obtain an in-depth knowledge of the investigated phenomenon and enhance the robustness of their research studies due to their ability to employ methodological triangulation (Justice et al., 2020; Noble & Heale, 2019). I asked participants to share organizational documents and artifacts that (a) they had permission to share with me or that they were publicly available and (b) were associated with strategies nonprofit business leaders use to maintain financial sustainability during economic downturns.

There are benefits and drawbacks to collecting data through conducting semistructured interviews and reviewing organizational documents and artifacts (Crabtree & Miller, 2022; Deterding & Waters, 2021). Regarding the benefits of semistructured interviews, researchers carrying out semistructured interviews could pose participants clarification questions, enabling participants to expound on their responses (Alamri, 2019; Santhosh et al., 2021). When responding to interviewing questions,

researchers could also observe the nonverbal cues exhibited by participants (Chattaraman et al., 2019). Among the benefits of reviewing organizational artifacts and documents is the opportunity for researchers to perform methodological triangulation by gathering data from many sources and compare the data to determine if data alignment occurs (Cook & Weidmann, 2019; Justice et al., 2020). Additional benefit is that researchers may find new ideas or issues that require further investigation to identify potential themes (Alamri, 2019; Noble & Heale, 2019; Sechelski & Onwuegbuzie, 2019). The documents and artifacts of the organization comprise the proper spelling of personnel names and full accounts of events linked to the explored research phenomenon (Meek et al., 2021; Sechelski & Onwuegbuzie, 2019). I gathered data through semistructured interviews and posed probing questions, enabling participants to expound on their responses. I performed methodological triangulation by comparing data collected from semistructured interviews and organizational documents and artifacts and determined that data alignment had occurred.

Nonetheless, there are drawbacks to using semistructured interviews and reviewing organizational documents and artifacts (Aqil & Memon, 2020). Researchers recording of participants' responses to semistructured interviews may cause participants to feel anxious or uneasy (Alamri, 2019). Inexperienced researchers conducting semistructured interviews may face difficulties due to the absence of experience (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). Lastly, in an effort to delight the researchers, participants may incorporate bias into the research study by delivering the information they believe the researchers want to hear (Aqil & Memon, 2020). Additionally,

researchers could incorporate bias into their studies by exhibiting their opinions about the phenomenon under study and by displaying unspoken gestures (Gibson, 2019).

Concerning the downsides of reviewing organizations' documents and artifacts, a staff member of the participating organization may have created the documents and artifacts with biases based on the staff member's personal interests (Linton et al., 2019). The staff member having created the organizational documents and artifacts may have included their own bias into these records, resulting in an erroneous description of events and data (Linton et al., 2019). Additionally, researchers may have challenges acquiring access to particular organizational documentation and artifacts (Linton et al., 2019).

If necessary, researchers undertake a preliminary investigation. For example, researchers may choose to perform a pilot study to validate the scope and importance of the study's main topic (Cruz et al., 2020). Nonetheless, a preliminary pilot study is time-consuming and unnecessary for case study process, which is based on the acquisition of data from multiple sources, including semistructured interviewing, organizational documents, and artifacts (Chen et al., 2019). I did not conduct a pilot study because it is time-consuming and unneeded when utilizing semistructured interviews and organizational documents and artifacts to gather data.

Researchers conduct member checking to provide participants with a chance to assess the researchers' interpretations of their responses to interview questions in order to confirm the correctness of such interpretations (Butler et al., 2021). Furthermore, researchers employ member checking to enhance the credibility of the obtained data (Candela, 2019). Member checking has downsides as well. For example, researchers may



think that the absence of participant feedback indicates agreement with their interpretations of participant responses; nevertheless, participants may have never read these interpretations (Candela, 2019). Moreover, participants may be hesitant to dispute with the researchers' interpretations of their responses and may embrace these interpretations as true (Caretta & Pérez, 2019). I conducted member checking by providing participants with my interpretations of their responses to interview questions and requested that they validate the accuracy of my interpretations. I utilized member checking to enhance the credibility of this research study.

### **Data Organization Techniques**

Before starting data analysis, Creswell and Poth (2018) proposed that qualitative researchers develop an appropriate strategy for data organization. By organizing data, researchers are better inclined to conduct robust investigations (Greengard, 2019; Locke et al., 2022; Tomaszewski et al., 2020). Comparable to quantitative data in a database, it is helpful to collect data in an organized format (Gonzalez & Forister, 2020; Locke et al., 2022). I developed an efficient data organizing method that enabled me to conduct a more robust investigation.

Based on agreements with participants, I conducted semistructured Zoom videoconferencing interviews with seven open-ended interview questions (see the appendix). Moriña (2021) suggested each participant must have a distinct participation code to guarantee confidentiality. Leaders' participation codes comprised of the letter P followed by a number between 1 and 4. Consequently, I utilized codes P1, P2, P3, and P4 for four participants in this investigation, and reached data saturation with the four

participants. If I had not reached data saturation after four participants, I would have continued to interview participants until reaching data saturation. Similarly, I assigned the organizations involved codes O1, O2, O3, and O4. I omitted all identifiable data from the transcripts. One method of maintaining confidentiality, according to Horne and Paul (2019), is to replace the participants' identities, the names of persons referred by participants, and the names of places described with unique codes. I transcribed every interview, eliminated any content that could result in the participant's identification, and assigned the participant's distinct code to the transcription and all other documents and artifacts associated with that participant, guaranteeing participant confidentiality.

I stored the electronic transcripts and any reflective notes in folders secured by a password on a flash drive. The process of scanning and converting paper documents to PDF images ensured information security as part of data protection and secure storage. Scanning paper files to create digital files was the initial stage in documentary data organization. The further storage of digital files in a specific folder aided in the organization and retrieval of data. Moreover, as suggested by Tomaszewski et al. (2020), these scanned files also had annotated bibliographies to enhance indexing and retrieving of files.

In addition, I will keep digital information in the appropriate folder on the flash drive and store in an access-restricted, secured place at my home office with all the other preserved documents until I permanently destroy them after 5 years of completion of this study. A computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) enables investigators to organize and evaluate data more effectively (Niedbalski & Ślęzak, 2022).

Transferring raw data from an external hard drive into the CAQDAS application will enhance the planned study's data organization. Niedbalski and Ślęzak (2022) noted that although CAQDAS improves the data analysis process, it does not substitute the researcher's function for data organization and analysis. NVivo 14 software is a tool for qualitative research to analyze complex data, decipher code, identify trends, and compile insightful findings based on themes (Dalkin et al., 2021). Utilizing NVivo 14, I acquired, stored, and organized interview audio and video recordings, interview transcripts, documentations for evaluation, and any important notes or memorandums. Storing all information in a centralized area enabled efficient extraction and analysis.

Maintaining a reflective journal helps researchers show transparency of the research process (O'Kane et al., 2021) and facilitates the bracketing procedure (Shufutinsky, 2020). Maintaining a reflective journal aids researchers in documenting the study's process and capturing detailed depictions, such as responses to interviews and depictions of the interview surroundings (O'Kane et al., 2021). To guarantee transparency of the research process, I maintained a reflective journal in which I recorded perspectives, such as responses to the interview proceedings and environment, my thoughts and ideas throughout document analysis, and my conclusions regarding coding and theme identification.

Lobe et al. (2020) emphasized the need of not keeping data longer than necessary and the significance of ensuring the confidentiality of the data. Research data-protection legislation created a variety of best practices that researchers can implement to assure proper data security throughout the research process and following the completion of a

research study (Lobe et al., 2020). These best practices involve (a) defining the purpose of data collection, (b) receiving informed consent, (c) gathering only the relevant data necessary for the study, (d) utilizing the information only for the purposes of the research study, (e) storing the information only as long as necessary, and (f) securing the protection of the information.

During the research, I kept all original data on a flash drive and maintained physical documents in a secured cabinet with restricted entry, when not utilizing them. Several researchers applied such approaches to assure proper safekeeping measures. In addition, Spencer and Patel (2019) mentioned that researchers must address ethical standards for data obtained throughout field study, such as preserving physical copies in a locked storage cabinet and digital files on a password-protected computer. In compliance with Walden University's guidelines, I will store the original data in a secured cabinet for 5 years after completing the research study. I will physically destroy the flash drive and shred the hard copies of the original data after 5 years.

### **Data Analysis**

Triangulating data improves the research's scope, deepness, and robustness (Fusch et al., 2018). Utilizing multiple techniques, such as methodological triangulation, researchers are able to acquire and validate research study data and findings (Jentoft & Olsen, 2019; Moon, 2019). Methodological triangulation refers to the use of multiple evidence sources to enhance the authenticity and trustworthiness of the data (Nassauer & Legewie, 2019; Solé, 2019). Researchers can explore a research topic from different perspectives using methodological triangulation (Jentoft & Olsen, 2019). When a

researcher applies data triangulation from semistructured interviews and document reviews, for example, a convergent evidence is created. Convergence evidence, as illustrated by Moon (2019), improves the construct validity of case studies. Using methodological triangulation, I triangulated evidence from different data sources, including interviews and organizational documents and artifacts. Applying methodological triangulation, I verified the validity, trustworthiness, and factuality of the data, analysis, and interpretations. Through member checking, I confirmed the validity of the interpreted data with the research participants. I requested participants to confirm the validity of my interpretations of their responses to the interview responses by providing them with such interpretations. To ensure data alignment, I matched the member checked data with the information I reviewed and obtained from organizational records and artifacts.

Analyzing qualitative data is typically a continual process that happens concurrently with data collection (Goffin et al., 2019; Orth et al., 2020). Thematic, content, and discourse analysis are several qualitative data analysis techniques available (Natow, 2019; Oswald, 2019). The researcher conducting a thematic analysis must review interview transcripts multiple times to create a sense of the text (Bonello & Meehan, 2019; Young et al., 2020). CAQDAS, such as NVivo 2020, helps researchers with the classification, organization, and analysis of data (Dalkin et al., 2021; Laranjo et al., 2020). Additionally, researchers use CAQDAS to identify themes and their interrelationships (Brower et al., 2019; Granger et al., 2019).

In the data analysis process, researchers utilize five consecutive steps involving: (1) compilation, (2) disassembly, (3) reassembly, (4) clarification, and (5) conclusion (de Leeuw et al., 2019; Yin, 2018). The first step entailed the collection and arrangement of data in order to identify patterns and themes in various interview transcripts. According to Dalkin et al. (2021), researchers can code and analyze the research evidence utilizing qualitative data analysis tools such as NVivo 2020. Utilizing NVivo 2020, researchers may rapidly order, code, and classify vast amounts of data (Dalkin et al., 2021; Laranjo et al., 2020). The second step included disassembling the data to apply appropriate codes. The third step comprised reassembling and reordering the data according to themes. The fourth step consisted of the application of thematic analysis to confirm the interpreted data by comparing to the interview transcriptions. To address the research question, qualitative researchers conduct thematic analysis to find patterns and themes in the data (Bonello & Meehan, 2019; Erickson, 2019; Skjott Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019).

During the data analysis process, I utilized NVivo 14 to arrange data by common themes, code, and interpret interview data and document reviews from the raw data. Utilizing NVivo 14, I categorized codes, mapped themes, and determined in the data sets the interconnections between themes. Combining thematic analysis and member checking allows researchers to verify the interpreted data with the participants (Brear, 2019). Conducting member checking allowed me to validate the robustness of the interpreted data with the research participants. Providing participants with my interpretations of their responses to interview questions allowed me to verify the accuracy of my interpretations.

The application of several data sources is one of the key attributes of case study research (Moon, 2019). The triangulation of data, according to Fusch et al. (2018), increases the data's breadth and depth. Through methodological triangulation, researchers authenticate the validity of data gathered from semistructured interviews and documentation reviews (Orth et al., 2020). Documents relevant to the study organization are the second source of information needed for triangulation. Several data analysis techniques are available for documentations review (Oswald, 2019). They consist of theme and content analysis (Vaismoradi & Snelgrove, 2019). I reviewed study-related documentations and artifacts utilizing content analysis. Applying content analysis to study data by the researchers needs a systematic classification of recognized codes and identification of emergent themes (Lindgren et al., 2020). The three phases of content analysis as a data analysis strategy for document analysis include preparing, organizing, and reporting (Lindgren et al., 2020). Through multiple sources of evidence, I triangulated the acquired data from semistructured interviews and documentation reviews. The fifth step entailed drawing conclusions and making suggestions based on the data to address the central research question, according to Creswell and Poth (2018) and Yin (2018). I conducted the five data analysis steps by compiling and assembling the acquired data, dismantling the data codes, reassembling the data by themes in order to comprehend the study phenomenon, applying thematic analysis to interpret the data, and drawing conclusions from the research findings.

Kiger and Varpio (2020) found that mapping the connection in various data sets enables researchers in concentrating on main themes in the research data to address the

study's overarching question and in correlating important themes with the literature and the conceptual framework (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Adu (2019) suggested that coding data using labels facilitates the correlation of important themes through data classifications. Researchers identify the statistical emergence of thematic codes in each data classification through a frequency analysis approach (Adu, 2019). Utilizing NVivo 14's data-coding tool, I mapped major themes into data categories, hence improving the credibility of this study. In the literature, researchers identify the conceptual framework's central themes (Lee, 2021). Researchers apply the conceptual framework to establish a connection between prior literature, research method, and study results. I established a link between this study's primary themes with the conceptual framework and current literature.

### **Reliability and Validity**

In qualitative investigations, researchers achieve reliability and validity by meeting Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four commonly acknowledged standards including credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability. Researchers refer to the combination of these four standards as a study being trustworthy (Stahl & King, 2020). Researchers address the comparability of a quantitative study's reliability and validity components by establishing the trustworthiness of a qualitative study.

#### **Reliability**

In qualitative research, particularly case studies, achieving reliability is a challenge. To obtain convincing and trustworthy findings, researchers must utilize dependable tools, instruments, and assessment techniques (Nassaji, 2020). I utilized



interviews and company documentation and artifacts as two sources of authentication for this case study, as recommended by Nassaji (2020). According to Yin (2018), the researcher must immediately recognize that no particular source has an absolute edge against any other sources; instead, all sources are deeply complementary. Therefore, a quality case study include as many evidence sources as feasible.

Dependability is defined as the repeatability or stableness of the analyzing methods, gathering data, interpreting findings, and reporting outcomes over time (Haven & Van Grootel, 2019). I utilized similar list of interview questions (see the +-appendix) for consistency with gathering data, reducing the riskiness of bias interpretation, improving reliability, and increasing dependability as suggested by various authors (see Danese et al., 2021; Stahl & King, 2020). Lastly, as recommended by experts (Brear, 2019; DeCino & Waalkes, 2019), I applied *member checking* to verify dependability of data. The member checking process includes offering participants with the researchers' interpretation of participants' responses to interview questions and requesting that participants confirm the exactness of these interpretations (DeCino & Waalkes, 2019). Member checking is an effective method for enhancing the dependability of data by guaranteeing that the researcher's prejudices are not merged with the evidence (Amin et al., 2020).

By recording the interview session, the researcher is able to revisit and contemplate on what the interviewees said during the session, resulting in accurate transcripts and themes (Edwards & Holland, 2020). To minimize the probability for me adding my own prejudices, I requested interviewees to clarify their responses in sufficient

detail. If participants' responses lacked depth or significance, I requested further clarification. As proposed by a number of authors (Jones & Reeve, 2018; Puchalski Ritchie et al., 2019), I refrained from discussing the nature of the study with participants ahead of the interview in order to produce more reliable findings and prevent influencing their opinions. As suggested by various scholars (Jones & Reeve, 2018; Puchalski Ritchie et al., 2019), I adhered to the interview protocol and refrained from asking different questions in order to keep everything consistent and enhance reliability.

### **Validity**

The research validation model comprises credibility, confirmability, and transferability (Amin et al., 2020). To ensure creditability, case study researchers utilize multiple data collection methods and compare gathered data to ascertain if data convergence persists (Aguilar Solano, 2020; Farquhar et al., 2020). If there is just one researcher conducting the data analysis process, the analysis' creditability is based on how inclusive and representative the data are as a whole (Schmeller, 2019). Reading the interview transcripts comprehensively can assist in creating credibility (Schmeller, 2019). As a result, I conducted a comprehensive analysis of the interview transcriptions to guarantee that I have accounted for every aspect of the participants' viewpoints. As suggested by experts (Tincani & Travers, 2019), I conducted member checking after transcribing and prior to data analysis to verify the accuracy of my interpretations of the participants' answers to interview questions. I performed member checking by providing interviewees with my understandings of their responses to interview questions and requesting that they confirm the accuracy of my interpretations.

The applicability of study outcomes to other studies is referred as transferability (Hayashi et al., 2019; Timulak & Elliott, 2019). The objectives of case study researchers, according to Yin (2018), must be to produce high-quality results by selecting appropriate study participants, providing detailed demographic data, conducting comprehensive data analysis, and reporting findings in an insightful format to enhance the transferability of the study. To enhance the transferability of this study, I delivered high-quality outcomes by selecting appropriate study participants, adhering to the data collection and analysis techniques for the research design, using the interview protocol, reaching data saturation, conducting exhaustive data analyses, and presenting findings in an understandable format.

The researchers' capability to prove that the research data reflect the true understanding of the study participants without the biases of researchers is referred as confirmability (Forero et al., 2018; Lin et al., 2019), which occurs following the establishment of creditability, dependability, and transferability (Arroyo & Landa, 2019). I did my best to listen to every participant and documented my opinions, observations, and prejudices. To enhance the confirmability of the findings, I concentrated on accurate transcription of interview responses, creating a link between data and findings, and utilizing the available literature review. I conducted member checking and methodological triangulation to ensure the results can be confirmed by others. As recommended by various experts, methodological triangulation enhances the validity of a case study (Fischer & Van de Bovenkamp, 2019; Hejji Alanazi, 2019). Methodological triangulation consists of data comparison from various sources to verify if there is

alignment of data (Deans et al., 2018; Solé, 2019). In my study, I employed methodological triangulation by utilizing semistructured interviews, organizational documents, and artifacts. More specifically, I compared the data collected from conducting semistructured interviews with data collected from reviewing organizational documentation and artifacts and determined that data alignment had occurred. Because the case study research approach is based on the collection of data from different sources, methodological triangulation of data sources is the primary strategy aiding the validity principles of case study research (Haydn, 2019).

In this study, I kept interviewing participants until I achieved data saturation. Data saturation refers to the stage at which additional data gathering and analyzing can no longer yield new, useful data (Ang et al., 2019; Sebele-Mpofu, 2020). A researcher cannot draw definitive results without data saturation (Braun & Clark, 2021); accordingly, I achieved data saturation when engaging in additional data gathering and analyzing could no longer yield new, useful data or themes.

### **Transition and Summary**

In Section 2, I provided a restatement of the purpose of the study, an explanation of the role of the researcher, a description of the participants, the population and sampling methods, and ethical concerns related to this study. Additionally, I provided a justification of the research method and design and discussed my plans for data collection, organization, and analysis. I finished Section 2 with a description of reliability and validity concerns as they pertain to this study. Section 3 will include the (a) introduction, (b) presentation of the findings, (c) application to professional practice, (d)

implications for social change, (e) recommendations for action, (f) recommendations for further study, (g) reflections, and (h) conclusion.

### Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

In Section 3, I present a summary of the study's purpose, the research question, and the findings of the study. This section also includes applications of my research to professional practice, social change implications, recommendations for action and additional research, and reflective thoughts. Lastly, the conclusion includes the study's closing statements.

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies that some nonprofit business leaders use to maintain financial sustainability during economic downturns. The sample consisted of four business leaders from four different nonprofits in the State of Wisconsin with successful strategies to maintain financial sustainability during economic downturns. The participation criteria were nonprofit business leaders who possessed at least 15 years of experience using strategies to maintain financial sustainability during economic downturns, allowing them to survive the Great Recession of 2008-09, and the most recent COVID-19 pandemic.

I invited by email qualified participants to acquire their consent for participation in this study. I conducted the interviews via Zoom audio and video-recorded meetings, which lasted between 30-60 minutes for each interview session. To tackle my personal biases and increase transparency, I engaged in reflexivity to think about my decisions and perspectives by keeping notes of the data I acquired before my interviews. I conducted member checking to confirm the accuracy and reliability of my interpretations of participants' answers to interview questions. Additionally, I analyzed organizational

internal and credible public records to determine data alignments had occurred. The records I acquired included documentations and artifacts available to participants without further approval required by organizational policies, such as financial statements, funding community, board oversights, fiscal information, Form 990s and audited financial reports available on the companies' websites, and nonprofits' database website called Candid, formerly known as GuideStar. I reviewed, particularly, the Form 990s (2019-2021), board members and management backgrounds, funders and partnerships information, policies, and other social media handles such as Facebook and LinkedIn platforms' information. Four key themes emerged from the data analysis, which are (a) focus on fiscal oversights and operational funding, (b) focus on human resources, (c) review operational capacities of program services, and (d) maintain strong internal systems and infrastructure.

### **Presentation of the Findings**

The central research question for this qualitative explorative multiple case study was: What strategies do some nonprofit business leaders use to maintain financial sustainability during economic downturns? I conducted semistructured interviews with open-ended questions and reviewed organizational documents and artifacts to explore strategies that some nonprofit business leaders use to maintain financial sustainability during economic downturns. I analyzed data from the four interview participants (P1, P2, P3, and P4) using NVivo 14 Software and Microsoft Excel spreadsheet, and reviewed organizational records (O1, O2, O3, and O4), to conduct methodological triangulation. I

determined that data collected from conducting semistructured interviews aligned with data collected from reviewing organizational documentation and artifacts.

### **Theme 1: Focus on Fiscal Oversights and Operational Funding**

The first key theme that emerged from the data analysis was that successful nonprofit business leaders focused on fiscal oversights and operational funding involving prudent financial resource management. An example of prudent financial resource management included the review of revenues and expenses predictions or projections, policies and procedures, current funding sources and terms, relationships status with funders and the exploration of the potential to increase new operational funding opportunities to maintain financial sustainability during economic downturns. I found that all four business leaders placed emphasizes on the importance of focusing on financial management of scarce resources by closely monitoring and evaluating all financial and operational activities to swiftly adjust to any impact during economic downturns. Some of the critical needs cited by all the four business leaders referenced monitoring and evaluating operational costs and potential funding sources to maintain organizational infrastructures that impact the levels of program services and staffing in meeting their societal missions.

#### ***Participants' Responses and Thematic Outcome Analysis***

P1, the executive director of O1, pointed out that financial sustainability is about ensuring the availability of operational unrestricted funding every year, and having the systems and infrastructure to effectively manage the organizational financials and operations without relying on a particular person. P1 described the strategies used to



achieve this goal by stating that, “well, I would say, so I'm going to speak sometimes from the perspective of me being at O1, and what I have to do to ensure we have the funding every year to do the work that we do.” P1 further articulated the perspectives of operational funding and added, “we can increase the amount, the percentage of operational funds that we raise that are like unrestricted dollars, and that gives you the organization, a cushion, you know, to sort of weather any sort of economic downturn.”

In addition, P1 emphasized the importance of internal systems and infrastructure by adding that “thinking around sustainability for me comes down to really spending time creating procedures and processes, and infrastructure around operations and financials that are bigger than any one person.” Furthermore, P1 shared that communication with funders and reviewing relationships with the funding community are also very critical by stating that “having more unrestricted dollars, operational funding, like, you get there by having conversations with your funders and being transparent about why that's important. Not everybody has relationships with their funding community to be able to talk, right?” For instance, P1 shared that O1 qualified for the COVID-19 funding support from the government through the Payroll Protection Program (PPP) during the pandemic, which was very helpful in offsetting operational costs due to income losses. P1 indicated that a higher portion of their funding (80-85%) come from nongovernment sources and was severely affected by the loss of operational revenues and shared that “PPP came along for nonprofits, and so that actually helped, because we did lose income.” Consistent with the assertion by P1 about unrestricted funding as key to financial sustainability, some researchers found that most nonprofits do not survive during economic crises due to lack

of liquid and unrestricted operating funding sources (Kim & Mason, 2020; Prentices & Clerkin, 2023). In addition, Searing et al. (2021) and Trejo-Pech et al. (2023) underpinned the importance of strategic planning and resource management, which were supported by P1 including resilient infrastructure and internal systems, communicating, and cultivating relationships with community partners for nonprofits to maintain financial sustainability during economic downturns.

Echoing similar perspectives as P1 during the interview, P2, the director of administration and training at O2, elaborated further about the importance of prudent financial management of scarce resources through tightly monitoring, evaluating, and making sound spending decisions. P2 shared that “the most important thing that we do is we are really tight in managing our income and our expenses. So, we do a lot of forecasting.” P2 emphasized fiscal oversight and operational funding, and stated that, “I mean, a lot of it's just monitoring, monitoring, making sure it's OK looking at the actuals, looking again at the trends, the projections.” P2 mentioned the importance of the board’s involvement in fiscal oversight, as it monitors closely on monthly basis projections and makes tough financial sustainability decisions. P2 stated that:

We made a decision that will sustain us for a long time, so that was really important and so, but yeah, just having those tough conversations, you're getting the board involved as needed. All of those things you're just monitoring on a monthly basis.

Similarly, P2 placed a key importance on relationships with funders and other stakeholders and stated, “when you have relationships where you work with a lot of

people or have worked with people or vendors for a long time, it makes sense. And so, I guess just to be, again, transparent and honest with people.”

Furthermore, P2 mentioned that O2 also received operating funding from the government’s PPP to help through the COVID-19 pandemic and shared that, “we also got some PPP funds during the COVID that filled some gaps for us financially for two years, which were really, really, really helpful.” According to P2, a major part of their funding (about 90%) comes from nongovernmental sources, including churches and private contributors or foundations, which directly or indirectly impacted losses in operational revenues. P2 stated:

So, if people don't have the ability to donate because you know the economy is hitting themselves, that will not only impact us, but it will impact foundations that we're getting money from, that will impact churches that we're getting money from, and so that those are all revenue streams, and they're significant revenue streams for us.

The opinion expressed by P2 about the effects of the economic crises, and the importance of managing scarce financial resources fiscally responsibly by not overspending is supported by several researchers (Amble, 2023; Lower & Czekanski, 2019). Furthermore, many researchers found that having open communications with community funders, staff, partners, and all stakeholders, and cultivating relationships due to the negative impact of external shocks, directly and indirectly, on contributors or donors, play critical roles for nonprofits in surviving economic downturns (Trejo-Pech et al., 2023).

P3, the chief executive officer of O3, elaborated that the main strategy during economic crises is to reach out to their funding sources and start communicating. P3 shared that “interestingly enough, the strategy that we used, and that really helped us through both of those periods [the Great Recession (2008-09) and COVID-19] were to kind of dig in and work with our funding sources.” Contrary to P1 and P2, P3 shared that their main sources of funding come from the government (80-85%). Furthermore, P3 explained that because their core services, housing and homeless prevention support were directly aligned with the critical needs during both the Great Recession and COVID-19 economic downturns and received additional fundings. The additional fundings came through governmental emergency programs to support the increased demands in programs and services. P3 shared:

So, one of our main funding sources is the Department of Housing and Urban Development and during the Great Recession, because there were so many people that were at risk of losing their housing or becoming homeless, there was legislation passed by the Obama administration to inject additional funding into those areas, and [O3] as an organization, that's always been one of our core services. That is making sure that people are safe and housed, and are avoiding homelessness, either through eviction or other, you know, loss of their jobs. So, really working with people like that. So, we as an organization got additional funding and during the 2008 Great Recession, we ended up adding more people to respond to that. And looking at the question, the response is the same for the COVID-19 pandemic. We've always been, or our history and our reputation is

really being able to be nimble and adjust as things change, and to respond to the external conditions. So, with the COVID-19 pandemic, we ended up being a grantee through the Department of U.S. Treasury that President Trump and then President Biden added millions of dollars to assist both tenants and landlords who were going to be impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic by creating emergency rental assistance.

I identified passion in P3's expressions when discussing the way the organization is committed, responsible, and prepared to address challenges both externally and internally during economic crises, which has potentially contributed to the increased or steady funding streams from partners to continue providing their critically needed services. In addition, P3 stressed the importance of working with community partners and using the organizational long-term strategic management infrastructure in responding to increased operational demands, by sustaining their staffing, programs, and services during economic downturns. P3 elaborated:

I think it's just kind of why the organization was created to handle, to work with people during crisis. So, I think that's kind of in our DNA is to be able to respond and, you know, kind of roll up our sleeves and do our services, and work with other community partners and make sure that we're able to be there and be responsive. So, it's part of the strategic plan in our DNA, it is mostly long-term planning.

Moreover, P3 emphasized how their historical successes of the financial strategies are measured in terms of their effectiveness, based on funders' or community partner's expectations, and through their ability to maintain service and staff levels. P3 shared that:

I think it's in the level of service and our being able to maintain staff. So, it's one thing to be able to respond to the need and get the revenue, and get the programming expanded. But you know, making sure that we're able to also get employees to come and work for us, and then deliver on those expanded government contracts.

Trejo-Pech et al. (2023) proposed that many nonprofits fail, particularly, during economic crises because of a lack of long-term financial management plan or infrastructure because the leaders focus only on the immediate organizational mission, but they need both to survive, as I identified from P3's responses. Also, Lower and Czekanski (2019) argued the key roles communication and outreach involving community stakeholders play in maintaining financial sustainability, as opined by P3 during economic downturns.

Similarly, P4, the chief operating officer of O4, indicated that the main source of funding comes from the government and shared various similarities as P3, including the emphasis on financial and operational management infrastructures, and alignments of their core services, such as housing, homeless prevention, and unemployment assistance services during the past economic downturns. P4 shared, "OK, well, first of all, usually when there's an economic downturn, our organization tends to flourish. So, when

unemployment is high, we get money to help people navigate the unemployment system.” Moreover, P4 stated, “ours is mostly government” and further elaborated that:

So, in general, I think that what we want to do as an agency is maintain our infrastructure, you know, to make sure that we have enough resources to sustain our financial department, which is critical, our resource development in planning, because we need to always be looking at opportunities, and then obviously IT, financial, if I mentioned it, and legal. So, we have this group that we meet with every Tuesday, and we're always discussing external situations, of course, internal situations, and so the strategy of course is to maintain that synergy to make sure we don't lose staff during tough times. But as I said, during economic downturns, we haven't felt a reduction in funding.

P4 placed high value on why infrastructure is critical, especially, involving financial resource oversight, maintaining operational funding, planning strategic resources, and maintaining program service and staff levels.

P4 further explained how they effectively implemented and measured their financial resources management and sustainability strategies during economic downturns by stating that:

Well, like you know, again, the main goal, keeping our infrastructure intact, making sure that we have enough funding to support kind of the engine, what keeps the agency going. And so, we measure that effectiveness, you know, is each department staffed up? Do we have enough resources to do what we need to do and that's kind of how we measure, you know, just making sure we can keep the

momentum going? And not lose a critical position or not be able to fund a critical position. And then, you know, looking at what are those opportunities and then quarterly, we report to the board if there are new projects that we're working on or have some of the contracts been renewed. It's all about sustainability, and it's not really about what we can get at the moment, but it's also about what we can keep.

Ab Samad and Ahmad (2022) identified the vital roles played by infrastructure capacity, board oversight, planning and development, human resources, and stakeholder networking for opportunities in maintaining organizational sustainability in support of the opinions expressed by P4 during the interview. Rodríguez-Arias et al. (2021) suggested that internal systems of nonprofits provide the foundation for organizational sustainability during economic downturns.

At the end of each interview session, I requested from all participants documentation and artifacts available from their respective organizations related to our interviews without the need for further approval to enable me to conduct methodological triangulations. I followed up with the requested list of information through emails for their convenience. Furthermore, I reviewed organizational records found on their respective websites and other credible publicly available records, including social media, Facebook, and LinkedIn platforms, and GuideStar, now known as Candid, as discussed below.

### ***Organizational Records Analysis and Methodological Triangulation***

The most comprehensive resources I obtained about the participants' organizations, O1, O2, O3, and O4, to conduct methodological triangulation came from



their respective websites, the audited financial records, and IRS Form 990s I retrieved from the Candid/GuideStar database. Based on my analysis of all the available records I obtained, I was able to verify and confirm what my participants shared with me. I compared the audited financial and operational information found in the audited financial statements and Form 990s between 2019 and 2021 to examine the trends prior to, during, and after COVID-19 periods based on the narratives by my participants P1, P2, P3, and P4.

I determined from the comparisons of O1's audited financial reports and Form 990s (2019–2021) the composition of program-based restricted funding from all sources. In accordance with P1, I discovered that governmental and nongovernmental contributions made up an average of about 85% of total revenues before, during, and after COVID-19. The restricted funding sources consisted of fiscal sponsorships, foundational grants, government funding, and all other donor-advised or program-specific contributions. The government portion accounted for about 35% out of 85% of all restricted funding. The unrestricted operational funding came from membership dues, fundraising, event sponsorships, and other fee-based services and programs and was estimated at about 15% of the total revenues.

Consistent with P1's responses, due to the impact of the pandemic on operational revenue losses, the unrestricted operational funding was reduced to about 8% during 2019–2021. O1 experienced increased financial distress as a result of the reduction in unrestricted operational funds, which led to the request for the PPP, as P1 had described it to weather the storm. The overall contributions and grants O1 received increased by an

estimated 45-50%, due to higher demands for core services including financial and housing services. However, they contributed to the restricted program-based revenues, as P1 stated and in line with my analysis. Furthermore, I was able to verify various spending information P1 pointed out, such as maintaining program service and staffing levels through the expenses-analysis approach. Based on my analysis, the program-related expenses increased by about 20%, and the corresponding operational salary-related expenses increased by about 12% over the period, which reflected the increased demands in the core services. Some researchers agreed that government funding intervention during economic downs, such as the PPP, especially for relatively small nonprofits, improves the chances of organizational sustainability (Thornton & Lecy, 2023). Moreover, Chen (2021) found that many nonprofits face increased expenses due to a corresponding increase in services demand during economic crises, but lack enough operating funding to meet demands, which consequently causes the nonprofits to collapse.

I verified the accuracy and dependability of the interview responses shared by P2 by examining O2's organizational records and employing a similar strategy as with O1. Based on my review, I confirmed most revenues received by O2 are from nongovernmental sources, which was about 85% of overall revenues. As pointed out by P2, comparatively minimal governmental contributions or grants were around 3%. The unrestricted funding, accounting for about 15%, came from federated campaigns, fundraising, and various fee-based programs and services. I identified that most revenue sources from nongovernmental or private contributions, including both restricted and

unrestricted funding, dropped about 21% during the 2019-2021 period. The drop confirmed the impact of the pandemic on private contributions and the reduction in some programs and services as expressed by P2. Also, I found that the reductions in private contributions and unrestricted operational revenues, coupled with its relatively small size, caused additional financial distress, as P2 shared. O2 also needed governmental assistance from the PPP to weather the storm, which resulted in about a 4% increase in government contributions during the pandemic.

Consistent with the information P2 shared, and using the expenses-analysis approach, I was able to verify the accuracy of various spending adjustment information about O2. I identified O2's operational and fiscal oversight activities related to infrastructure, strategic planning, and other financial and operational events from the documentation and records. Due to cuts in some programs and services, such as youth and family services, I discovered that program-related expenses had decreased by about 5%. The program-related expenses accounted for about a 10% reduction in overall expenses, whereas salary-related expenses increased by about 19%. The increase in salary-related costs was due to efforts by the management team to maintain staff and critical services levels despite increased costs, such as insurance benefits, transportation, and other direct operational expenses impacted by the pandemic. Lee et al. (2022) and Thornton and Lecy (2023) acknowledged that government grants are beneficial to the survival of some nonprofits, especially, based on vulnerability factors, such as external shocks and limitations in age and size; however, they are useful as a short-term solution. In addition, Amble (2023) emphasized the importance of resource allocation and

organizational financial management inefficiencies that cause many nonprofits to fail, particularly, during economic downturns.

Reviewing O3's documentation and records, I verified what P3 shared based on a similar data comparison approach I used for O1 and O2, particularly from the 2019-2021 audited financial statements and Form 990s. I found Q3 received significantly additional program-based funding from the government due to the increased demands of core services including housing and homeless prevention services during the pandemic. O3's government funding, which accounted for about 95% of overall revenues, rose by almost 85% because of the impact of the recent pandemic's economic downturn on people in need, as shared by P3.

Furthermore, in accordance with the narrative expressed by P3, O3's program-related and staff-related costs increased significantly by an estimated 530% and 40%, respectively. The sharp rise in spending expenses was due to the increase in staffing needs and costs driven by core services demanded during the COVID-19 pandemic. Overall, I noted that O3's infrastructure capacity, funding stability, and relatively large size, provided the organizational financial management capabilities to weather the storm. Thus, O3's ability to maintain operations, staffing, and the levels of services, played key roles in their historical successes in surviving during economic downturns. O3 operated effectively without resorting to many economic shocks; government assistance, such as the PPP; or the minimal unrestricted funds, which accounted for about 2%. Consistent with the findings by Ab Samad and Ahmad (2022), organizational capacities, such as infrastructure, planning and development, board involvement, and community

networking, play key roles in achieving financial sustainability during economic downturns. Moreover, Park et al. (2021) argued that higher solvency, which is the ability to pay medium to long-term liabilities, is a critical indicator of nonprofit financial sustainability capacity.

Similarly, by reviewing the 2019-2021 audited financial statements and Form 990s of O4, I verified the key financial information P4 shared during the interview. I found O3 and O4 shared many similarities, noting both organizations' main sources of funding came from the government, accounting for about 95% of overall revenues. Also, the core services, such as housing, homeless prevention, and job loss support services, are similar. For instance, P4 pointed out that due to the increased demand for O4's core services, O4 received additional funding to provide homeless prevention and unemployment-related support. Furthermore, P4 emphasized maintaining infrastructure to keep the levels of resources, service, and staff basically needed as the engine of the organization. Consistent with what P4 shared, I identified a significant increase in governmental grants towards programs and services, almost a 100% increase in funding over the pandemic period.

Additionally, due to the increased demand for core services and corresponding staffing needs, O4's salary-related expenses rose by an estimated 91%. Moreover, there was a corresponding increase in other operational and program service expenses estimated at about 80%. Similarly, I noted that O4's organizational capacities are due to infrastructure capacity, steady government funding, and relatively larger size (annual budget of over \$50 million). The financial management capacity supported the ability to

increase or maintain operations, staffing, and the levels of services, in surviving during economic downturns. Like O3, O4 also provided uninterrupted services effectively without resorting to governmental emergency assistance, such as the PPP. Searing et al.'s (2021) tactical resiliency framework, which includes focusing on (a) financials (b) human resources, (c) outreach, (d) programs and services, and (e) leadership and management, especially during economic crises, supported the findings from the O4's review. Furthermore, Stötzer et al. (2022) argued that Searing et al.'s framework provides the most compelling findings in exploring nonprofit sustainability strategies during economic downturns.

### ***Correlation to the Literature***

Lower and Czekanski (2019) asserted that effective financial resource management is one of the biggest challenges facing the financial sustainability of many nonprofit organizations. Lower and Czekanski identified the important factors to effectively manage scarce financial resources, including steady incomes, steady expenses, and alternative funding sources, such as fundraising, membership fees, and sponsorships. Additionally, understanding management processes and ensuring fiscal responsibility; thus, maintaining a balanced budget and executive board's oversight, are key components in maintaining financial sustainability (Amble, 2023; Lower & Czekanski, 2019). Overall, I identified in Theme 1's outcome that all participants placed a high value on the need to maintain infrastructure and effectively manage financial resources. Particularly, P1 and P2 elaborated that tightly monitoring and effectively managing scarce financial

resources to make necessary and quick adjustments contributed to the financial sustainability during economic downturns.

Moreover, other factors all participants emphasized include communicating openly with organizational stakeholders in maintaining services, staffing, operational funding, and nurturing relationships in achieving financial sustainability. Searing et al. (2021) suggested that improving relationships through outreach with stakeholders during financial crises can provide opportunities for nonprofits during economic crises. The importance of communicating and cultivating relationships with stakeholders emerged across all five themes but with varying approaches based on the audience and purpose.

### ***Correlation to the Conceptual Framework***

Theme 1 correlates to Burns' (1978) transformational leadership theory because this framework demonstrates ways leaders can inspire followers to achieve common goals. In this context, all participants expressed working together with internal and external stakeholders to address the challenges and find solutions to achieve financial sustainability. The key ideas of the transformational leadership theory, such as idealized influences, individualized esteem, inspirational motivation, and intellectual simulations, fit with the ways all the participants did things. The leaders used open communication, cultivated relationships, ensured staff well-being, achieved teamwork, and used stakeholder outreach fitting the transformational leadership style to achieve common goals during economic downturns. In agreement, Northouse (2021) and Waerder et al. (2022) also asserted that transformational leaders can inspire followers to work together and achieve mutually beneficial goals. All four nonprofit business leaders demonstrated

ways they managed their scarce financial resources effectively by reaching out and inspiring all stakeholders to achieve financial sustainability.

## **Theme 2: Focus on Human Resources**

The second key theme that emerged from the data analysis was that successful nonprofit business leaders focused on human resources to maintain financial sustainability. Some examples of the approaches the participants used included having open communication with staff to ensure maintaining positions and providing incentives due to increased workloads. Particularly, P3 and P4 emphasized additional staffing needs and new hirings due to increased demand for core services during economic downturns. I identified that all four participants placed a high value on focusing on human resources by highlighting the need to maintain staff to meet service demands. Overall, participants expressed that building trust and collaboration is critical to retaining or adding needed positions to operate effectively and sustainably during economic downturns. All participants emphasized that open communication, teamwork, and staff well-being facilitate managing human resources effectively during economic crises. Furthermore, P1 and P2 indicated that the negative impact of economic distress on human resources may be minimized through outsourcing some overhead costs to contractors. Additionally, P1 and P3 emphasized that the use of technology through work-from-home and virtual activities reduced costs, improved staff well-being, and enhanced financial sustainability.

### ***Participants' Responses and Thematic Outcome Analysis***

P1 acknowledged that due to the limited staff capacity, the impact of the recent pandemic was overwhelming for all employees, with increased demand for core services.



Nonetheless, P1 described ways the collaborative and open communication between management and employees helped manage human resources steadily without risking salaries, positions, or service levels. P1 shared:

As for the employees, I would say we just have a very collaborative and open communication in terms of our office. So, our employees are present at all of our board meetings. They see the budget that I helped develop with the Finance Committee. I talked with them about all, and because our work has attracted interest and the kinds of things we do, we have been fairly steady, and so it's allowed me actually to even as costs have gone up in the last couple of years like with inflation, I've actually been able to maintain salaries and even provide cost of living adjustments because the funders, again, they're just getting better, and they seem to be more in tune with that sort of a thing. I think it's a little different than it was 10 or 15 years ago. But we have open communication with our employees, so I want them to, you know, be transparent about the process that we're doing, and how or where the funds are coming from. I do most of the fundraising, but they are part of those conversations. Though program directors are really the face of that work. And so, we have to all be working together on this.

P1 further underpinned the importance of strategic planning involving the staff and executive board as a means of identifying financial sustainability strategies during economic crises. P1 elaborated:

And so, our board and staff did that [strategic planning] in February, and so that planning process is sort of how it allowed us to kind of hone in on what we think it will really take, to increase our membership, and to seek out grant resources that are unrestricted.

Moreover, P1 articulated the perspectives of using professional services in the strategic planning process and shared, “and so, I would say, our strategy really is planning and transparency, and using professional services, contractors, and always thinking about, is there something we should do differently to get the desired outcome of accountability?”

P1 emphasized the importance of outsourcing some infrastructure to contractors as a means of saving on labor time and overhead costs, particularly as a small nonprofit organization. P1 explained that:

So, if you think about financial sustainability like we outsource a lot of infrastructure than other businesses or organizations. Like, we don't have an HR department, we outsource our HR services to a professional employer organization that manages payroll and benefits, and it actually provides great expertise, and were super helpful during the pandemic for us. We outsource our accounting; we don't have an accounting person on staff. We have a contractor that does it and comes in and then we have a CPA firm that prepares our financial statements so we have a structure to our organization where we don't have the overhead of staff operations. We outsource it as services. And so, I think that's another financial sustainability strategy that small organizations in particular, and I work with a lot of small organizations, and I'm surprised like they spend a lot of

money on things where I'm like, you know, if you did this or used a contractor, that could bring down the administrative cost, and in other words, that will also put less stress on your staff. Not full-time work, right?

Furthermore, P1 shared the use of virtual technology, stating, "like we weren't having in-person events. We were doing virtual ones, so those just cost less, right? So, even though our sponsorship income was down, it was okay." Kutieshat and Farmanesh (2022) suggested organizations need to rapidly adapt to using new human resource management strategies, such as virtual technology, to survive especially during economic downturns. Additionally, Sorribes et al. (2021) argued that some key variables to manage human resources successfully include (a) ensuring job satisfaction and stability, and (b) exhibiting trust in management.

According to P2, although all staff remained employed, there were significant reductions in staffing costs, including cutting retirement benefits and delaying salary raises and positions. P2 further explained that staffing expenses are the biggest cost and shared, "our biggest expense is staffing, so we delay, we delay staff positions. Sometimes we've had to cut back on benefits, so like our retirement benefit." P2 also expressed the importance of outsourcing some overhead costs, such as housekeeping, to reduce expenses during economic downturns. P2 stated that:

Due to economic issues and so there's, you know, sometimes it's cheaper to, you know, have contract employees or have contract vendors than actual employees. So, we did that probably around 2008, 2009 when we had housekeeping staff and it was just more affordable to just bring in a cleaner and so, we had to do that. We

cut back on our cleaning knowing that our cleaning cost crippled us, so we had to cut back.

In addition, P2 pointed out “we had to leverage volunteers to do things that we've had staff to do in the past.”

Furthermore, as P1 shared, P2 also emphasized that communication with staff was important to keep trust in management and reduce anxiety to support the organizational mission. P2 stated that:

I mean, there's a lot of uncertainty. So, I mean it's a big change. And so, there was a lot of communication in all of the times that we've gone through, you know, economic downturns. There's always a lot of communication, a lot of transparency just being real of like, hey, like this is like, here's the numbers and here are the decisions. And here are, you know, why, and having good communication, being transparent so that, you know, people are building trust and then just, you know, supporting. So, for some of our staff, they've been their tenure, they've been around a lot. So, they are confident in the decision, and you know, I haven't seen, or we haven't seen a lot of anxiety. I think some of the newer employees, maybe, are still trying to figure it out or figure us out that they might feel a little bit more uneasy. We do, you know, status meetings, one on ones, all of our managers do. So, they kind of have a good idea of where their staff are at individually and then they let senior leadership know like hey, my staff feeling really uneasy or they're doing good, very upbeat.

Overall, P2 expressed that there is synergy and trust amongst staff and leadership that help in adjusting and achieving financial sustainability during economic downturns. Sorribes et al. (2021) argued that employees are motivated and satisfied to maintain job performance during economic hardship if they trust management's human resource approach. Moreover, Zacher and Rudolph (2022) suggested that understanding employees' experiences and behaviors during economic crises contributes to sustainable human resource management in achieving organizational goals.

P3, in alignment with the financial analysis in Theme 1, reaffirmed the urgent need for additional staffing to meet increased demand for core services during economic downturns. P3 further pointed out that:

So, during this time, we were able to expand our staff. And I think it's, you know, it's because of the area of the nonprofit area that we serve. It's, you know, really is the most in need. So, you know, we're a basic needs organization with housing at our core. So, during both of those in 2008 and then again in 2020 and again since then, people's housing has been, making sure that people are able to maintain housing, has been critical. And what we ended up doing is again getting creative with our staffing. We also knew that there were going to be a lot of college students that normally would have taken jobs, you know, in the entertainment industry during the summer months while they were home, but because everything was shut down, we were able to employ a lot of college students. So again, getting the best and the brightest into the program.

Furthermore, like P1, P3 pointed out the key roles virtual technology played, in terms of cost reduction and staffing, in delivering core services during the COVID-19 economic downturn. P3 stated that, "I think the other piece of the responsiveness is we like quickly on a dime, we're able to shift our staff into virtual work experience. So, getting people working at home, getting all that setup, and getting their results."

Nonetheless, P3 acknowledged the stress impacted on the staff through the additional workload and unexpected onboarding challenges due to the increased demand for core services. P3 expressed ways staff welfare was addressed, such as acknowledging hard conditions and showing care and trust in management. P3 stated:

So, we were adding staff, but I think that the other piece that, because we were essential services, what we also really paid attention to was, we were in a crisis situation, the entire world, and our staff were still working, and so, it was a lot for them. So, we did a lot to make sure, and you can never do enough, but it was really hard on the staff, so just kind of like acknowledging their efforts as much as we could. I can't say enough for the staff, you know, especially our staff that were working on the frontline with the shelters. So, I think that is overwhelming.

Addressing the challenges presented with onboarding, P3 elaborated on the key barriers faced and the strategies used to overcome them, including team conversations and training. P3 shared:

I think one modification that we did was just in our hiring. So, we did a lot of just general recruitment of college students, and I think specific to the COVID-19

pandemic, there were, you know, a lot of people were out of work, but then there were also the other organizations that have positions to fill. So, the job market in this sector was very tight. So, we went with a kind of a different employee strategy. So, you know, with this recruitment strategy. It works, especially during the first year, but there's, you know, when you bring somebody on that doesn't have experience in the field, there's more time and attention to training. I think that the regular employees again, we just have an amazing team, and I think it was harder, and there was a lot of people that were close to burnout, but we made sure that we were, you know, putting things in place to kind of help address, that whole wellness part of this very hard work as well. So, I think that at the beginning, you know, everybody is like running 1,000,000 miles. We realized that, we really needed to slow things down and, you know, get that training in place, get that good onboarding.

In summary, P3 presented three key strategies for achieving human resource needs to effectively address the increase in services demanded. The strategies included (a) increasing staff workload and supporting staff welfare; (b) using virtual technology for staff to work from home; and (c) adopting new recruitment strategies to address onboarding challenges. Zacher and Rudolph (2022) agreed with P3's perspectives on supporting staff welfare and using virtual technology to maintain human resource sustainability during economic downturns. Furthermore, Thielsch et al. (2021) found challenges such as an increase in staffing demand and the potential adverse impact on human resource management in maintaining service levels.

According to P4, maintaining synergy to make sure all staff retain positions is one of the key human resource strategies used in achieving financial sustainability during economic downturns. P4 shared, "so the strategy of course is to maintain that synergy to make sure we don't lose staff during tough times." Furthermore, P4 elaborated on ways management can ensure that employees remain employed by using contractors if a funding source is temporary, especially during an economic crisis. P4 further explained that, in general, employees have confidence that management cares, and stated:

And, what we try to do, if we anticipate a big grant coming to an end, is we try to use contracts to get things done so that we're not, you know, making a commitment to employees. We kind of shift gears and hire, contract out some things, and then that doesn't affect our regular employees. Yeah, you know, I think in general, our employees have a good sense that we really care about them, and that we will do anything we can to keep them employed.

Additionally, P4 emphasized the importance of having discussions among program directors and managers to strategically plan staffing and program needs during the economic crisis. P4 articulated:

We also have larger discussions with like program directors and managers. So, you know, right now we have I think about 800 employees. We have about \$100 million budget a year. Yeah, it's huge right now. And so, but one of them is a really big contract that's \$50 million that will go away in a year. So, what we have discussions about, OK, you know, what are we going to do when this grant ends? How are we going to downsize back? And keep that infrastructure in place, and



again, we discuss contracts, short term employment opportunities for folks. And basically, that's how we work. It's a lot of discussions over strategies. So, we try to, our CEO is really open, so he likes to hear from different perspectives. So that's how we identify the strategies.

Also, P4 expressed the need to communicate at all levels, including with employees, to find solutions or strategies to issues during economic crises. P4 stated that, "so, when we have issues, we need to discuss them at all levels, not just the top level."

Moreover, P4 pointed out that flexibility and willingness to change or shift gears are critical in identifying financial sustainability strategies during economic downturns. For instance, P4 described the difficulty of hiring an in-house expert for an important housing position and management's willingness to change its approach by outsourcing to a contractor. P4 elaborated that:

And I think that you have to be flexible, and you have to be willing to shift gears. Like, we are looking for an expert to help us develop a certain area like housing, and we are currently looking for a housing specialist. There are resources out there for housing, but we don't have the expertise in-house. So, we want to hire that person, but we can't find. So, we have to shift gears and then, is there somebody we can contract with? Now, can we buy this expertise, so that would be kind of a shift of strategy for a key barrier we are still encountering.

Overall, like P3, P4 underpinned the difficulties in hiring qualified employees to meet increased service demands and performance obligations during economic downturns.

Additionally, P4 elaborated that staff were overwhelmed due to the extra workload and

were offered additional money as compensation for overworking and welfare. P4 shared that:

But we really need to talk about some of the issues sometimes, you know, like with this issue finding employees has been really tough. And if we don't have employees, it makes it difficult for us to perform. Because we have performance contracts, if we don't perform, we don't get paid. So, sometimes it's really tough so we got to really listen. We have to listen to our employees because we're labor or we're human driven. I mean, we can't function without our employees. So, I think you know, just kind of drilling down some of those issues and trying to figure out different ways of getting from here to there. And, because of the difficulty finding staff, and being short-staffed, some of the workers are overworked. So, then we offered additional money. So, we offer an increase in pay, but you can only do that so many times, you know? And I think we need to be mindful. We offered, like, overtime. So, if they work over the hours, they get the time and a half. And we offered, we offered a 10% incentive.

Consistent with P4, Kniffen et al. (2021) suggested focusing on communication, team synergy, and wellness to achieve sustainable human resource management during economic crises. Additionally, Carnevale and Hatak (2020) argued that supporting employee adjustments and welfare are key human resource strategies for maintaining organizational sustainability during economic downturns.

### ***Organizational Records Analysis and Methodological Triangulation***

Using the information obtained from Theme 2's financial analysis and the personnel documentation for the organizations, O1, O2, O3, and O4, I conducted methodological triangulation. Based on the analysis of all the available data and records, I verified and confirmed my participants' responses about the human resource management strategies shared. Particularly, I compared the financial and personnel information between 2019 and 2021 to examine the trends utilizing a similar program-driven, salary-expenses approach.

I was able to confirm the human resource management techniques of O1 that P1 had shared by using the salary-expenses analysis and identifying staffing trends. Consistent with P1's responses, I confirmed the human resource information P1 pointed out, such as maintaining program service and staffing levels, through the data analysis. For instance, program-related expenses rose by about 20%, and the corresponding operational salary-related expenses rose by about 12% over the period. The increases in program expenses and the corresponding salary expenses reflected the increased demands on the core services and additional costs related to the staff. As P1 shared, I identified that there were no staff reductions, and staff wages and benefits rose during the pandemic period.

Furthermore, as P1 pointed out, I found from the audited financial reports that human resources and other professional services are outsourced to reduce administrative costs. Also, through various digital communications on O1's website and other media, I confirmed the key role technology played in ensuring teamwork and the welfare of staff.

Some researchers argued that communication, teamwork, and well-being are critical human resource strategies during economic downturns to improve organizational sustainability (Sorribes et al., 2021). Moreover, Kutieshat and Farmanesh (2022) emphasized the important role technology plays in maintaining effective teamwork and welfare during economic crises and achieving sustainable human resources.

Likewise, using Theme 2's financial data and personnel information available, I was able to verify the accuracy of the human resource management strategies shared by P2. By examining O2's organizational records and using a similar approach as with O1, I confirmed the various program and staffing expense level adjustments and trends. For instance, I determined that, although overall program expenses decreased by about 10%, the corresponding salary-related expenses increased by about 19%. The trends I identified were primarily due to cuts in some services and increases in personnel expenses impacted by the pandemic. Furthermore, as shared by P2, I determined through the payroll and personnel information that there were no positions lost or work hours reduced.

Similar to O1, I found that O2's leadership outsourced some overhead services such as accounting, information technology, and management services due to its relatively small size. Additionally, I confirmed P2's disclosure of significant in-kind and volunteer support. Furthermore, through O2's various communication channels, including the company website and social media platforms, I verified the emphasis P2 placed on leadership's open communication practices. Kniffin et al. (2021) agreed that effective human resource management, particularly through teamwork with staff during economic crises, is critical to maintain organizational survival. Additionally, Sorribes et

al. (2021) asserted that trust in management and a focus on staff welfare are key human resource sustainability strategies during economic downturns.

Based on a similar data comparison approach I used for O1 and O2, I verified O3's human resource management strategies shared by P3. Analyzing the financial data from Theme 1 and the personnel information available, I confirmed the significant increases in O3's program and the corresponding salary costs. Consistent with the explanation provided by P3, O3's program-related and personnel-related expenses increased by an estimated 530% and 40%, respectively. As P3 described, the sudden demands for core services during the pandemic caused an urgent need to increase staffing to maintain program levels. O3's government funding, which accounted for approximately 95% of total revenues, also increased by nearly 85% due to the pandemic's economic impact on people in need, as reported by P3.

Furthermore, as P3 shared, I found through O3's robust online infrastructure the important role virtual technology played in building human resource capabilities during the pandemic. Overall, I noted that the increases in personnel benefits and the use of virtual technology confirmed O3's management concerns for staff welfare, as P3 expressed. Similarly, Zacher and Rudolph (2021) argued that sustainable human resource management includes using virtual technology to work from home and ensure wellness and job satisfaction. Also, Thielsch et al. (2021) found that virtual technology facilitated employers, due to in-person recruitment challenges, to maintain human resource capabilities during the pandemic.

Similarly, I used Theme 2's financial data and the personnel information available between 2019 and 2021 to verify the sustainable human resource strategies P4 shared. As I noted in Theme 1, O4 shared many functional characteristics with Q3, including main programs, fiscal trends, and human resource management practices. For example, like O3, due to the increased demand for O4's core services, O4 acquired additional funding and, consequently, increased staffing to maintain service levels. As shared by P4, I discovered a substantial increase in government grants for programs and services—nearly a 100% rise in funding during the pandemic.

Consistently, because of the increased need for core services and corresponding staffing needs, I confirmed that O4's salary-related expenses rose by an estimated 91%. I noted that the salary increments included significant benefits, indicating incentives paid to regular employees with overtime eligibility, as P4 shared. Additionally, as P4 elaborated, I ascertained that temporal staffing expenses increased through contract services to assure regular staff about management's commitment to retain positions. As Sorribes et al. (2021) suggested, trust in management and employee welfare, such as job satisfaction and stability, are key human resource strategies during economic crises. Likewise, Carnevale and Hatak (2020) argued that supporting employees' adjustments to uncertainties and ensuring overall staff welfare are vital human resource methods to maintain organizational sustainability.

### ***Correlation to the Literature***

Similar to financial resource management in Theme 1, many researchers consider effectively managing human resources as key to maintaining financial sustainability

during economic downturns (Kniffin et al., 2021; Zacher & Rudolph, 2022).

Additionally, Collings et al. (2021) argued that, during human crisis-related economic downturns, such as COVID-19, human resources may play the primary role in maintaining organizational sustainability. Collings et al. further elaborated that, in the past, when the financial sector impacted economic crises such as the Great Recession (2008–2009), financial and IT resource management played primary roles.

Some researchers propose that adaptability, communication, staff welfare, teamwork, and technology play crucial roles in sustainable human resource management for financial sustainability during economic downturns. For example, virtual events and working from home through modern technologies, such as Zoom meetings, played key roles in ensuring staff welfare during the recent pandemic (Kutieshat & Farmaneh, 2022). Kniffin et al. (2021) argued that communication, leadership, and teamwork are key to improving job quality and job security to achieve financial sustainability during economic crises. Additionally, Rigotti et al. (2021) and Sofo et al. (2021) suggested mindfulness for the psychological impact of economic crises on employees by providing appropriate interventions. Some support systems provided by human resource management include social, emotional, and behavioral interventions and skills training (Rigotti et al., 2021; Sofo et al., 2021). Consistently, I found in Theme 2's outcome that all participants emphasized teamwork and staff welfare in effectively managing human resources, particularly during economic downturns.

### ***Correlation to the Conceptual Framework***

Similar to Theme 1, Theme 2 also correlates to Burns' (1978) transformational leadership theory because this framework illustrates ways leaders can inspire followers to attain common goals. Based on Theme 2's key findings, including communication, teamwork, and employee welfare, I identified Burns' transformational leadership theory as fitting the strategies shared by all participants. For instance, as Burns described, my participants inspired followers to achieve common goals through emphases on communication, teamwork, and staff wellness in organizational sustainability during the pandemic. The outcome of Theme 2 related to the key concepts of transformational leadership theory, which include idealized influences, inspirational motivation, intellectual simulations, and individualized esteem. Sorribes et al. (2021) identified that successful human resource strategies include focusing on teamwork and staff wellness, which align with a transformational leadership approach to achieve common goals. Furthermore, Ehrnrooth et al. (2021) suggested that human resource management relates to transformational leadership through employee attitudes, such as organizational identification, self-efficacy, and work engagement, to maintain organizational sustainability.

### **Theme 3: Review Operational Capacities of Program Services**

The third key theme that emerged from data analysis was that effective nonprofit business leaders reviewed the operational capacities of program services to assess financial sustainability. I identified that the capacity assessment approaches the participants utilized were dependent on the economic impact specific to program



services' funding status, sector type, demand, and size. Similar to Themes 1 and 2, I discovered participants' priorities were placed on assessing the operational capacities to maintain staffing and program service levels. I also identified that financial and management resources play key roles in the operational capacities of program services, especially during economic downturns. For instance, P1 and P2 shared that, due to the small organizational sizes and limited resources, some program services' capacities were severely affected during the pandemic. Contrary to what was shared by P3 and P4, the relatively large financial sizes and management resources enabled the respective organizational capacities to meet increased demand for program services during economic downturns. Overall, this study's participants expressed the need to review and make necessary program services' adjustments, adaptations, or changes during economic uncertainties to maintain organizational sustainability.

### ***Participants' Responses and Thematic Outcome Analysis***

P1 elaborated on the types of program services O1 provides and the importance of reviewing individual operational capacities to ascertain the pandemic's economic impact and viability. According to P1, O1 is a membership association that provides technical assistance services to community nonprofits, including capacity building, banking access, financial empowerment, and sustainable housing. P1 stated that:

We serve as a technical assistance provider to nonprofits. So, for us, we're a membership association. We also do like contracted services type work, which usually it entails some sort of fiscal sponsorship, which are like, financial empowerment and banking access, and all became really important during the

past economic downturns. We did HUD [Housing and Urban Development] technical assistance and it was a housing crisis, right?

Additionally, P1 emphasized that O1 is very program-driven, which requires regular strategic planning to manage time and money efficiently, particularly during economic crises. P1 shared that:

We are so program-driven. So, we just did strategic planning. So, I would say, our strategy really is planning and transparency about our program services. We have to do things in a way that may not cost more in both money and time.

Moreover, P1 underpinned the need for constant program service improvement through a willingness for continuous learning as an organization by interacting, reviewing, and seeking feedback. P1 stated that:

I think that, it takes being an organization that's willing to constantly be in a process, like continuous learning, where you create tools that help you assess how are we doing, and why do we think we should be doing this? And is this effective? And so, I think you have to have this culture of being able to do that kind of inquiry as a group. And like, ongoing interaction and review, and getting feedback.

Nonetheless, P1 acknowledged some limitations in the assessment and operational capacities of program services due to O1's relatively small size and the resources needed.

P1 articulated:

So, I think it's just the capacity piece of being able to focus on nonprofit operations and strengthening what you're doing and being in continuous learning,

that is hard when you're small. When you're small, it's hard to, like, spend the time on that kind of process. I think the biggest one is just internal capacity.

Additionally, similar to Theme 1's financial management, P1 pointed out that the type of funding requirements play a key role in maintaining the program's capacity. According to P1, O1's operational funding is mainly restricted and cost reimbursement-based grants, meaning funds are tied to specific programs and costs incurred before funds are reimbursed. P1 expressed that the terms and conditions impact operational capacities and shared that:

And so, for me like, a lot of our funding is grants, and they're very specific. So, some are reimbursement based and that means they're tied to a specific activity, people, and, like, we have to spend the money, and then get reimbursed for the money. Others are tied to a very specific program, so, like I have to track, like how much is spent down in the grant and then what's carried over. So, it's whenever we do our audit or our financial review, like, it's always a conversation of having spent all the grant. So, with more restricted funds, you know, that just gives you the inability because it's like, oh, well, we didn't spend all that grant money, but we don't or I can't use it to pay my part of the salary because I don't work on that program, right?

Bryan et al. (2021) agreed that program service evaluation is a key tool to assess an organizational program's sustainability; however, most small nonprofits lack the required organizational capacities. Furthermore, Kotsi et al. (2023) highlighted the adverse impact

of a “starvation cycle” caused mostly by external pressures to allocate most resources to only specific programs.

P2 shared that some of the primary program services provided by O2 to needy people included serving food, providing healthcare, and assisting youth and families. P2 elaborated further on the importance of reviewing direct program resource allocations to assess the operational capacities of core services during economic downturns. P2 articulated that:

So for us, we evaluate expenses, and if it's expenses that are directly related to our program, so like serving food to people, you know, we are a nonprofit that we, you know, have healthcare services, you know, we serve youth and families, so if it's core to delivering programs, we spend it. But if it's like, hey, do we want to like, reprint promotional material or maybe send staff to training, or all of those things like those administrative thing costs, we would not spend those.

Additionally, P2 pointed out that a review of program service capacities includes an in-depth understanding of budget items related to the funding terms and conditions. P2 described some of the funding terms and conditions to evaluate, such as identifying and monitoring discretionary and nondiscretionary budgeted expenses. P2 stated that, “even within our program expenses, it was identified, this is an absolute expense, and this is a discretionary expense. So, there's a lot more discretionary conversations on expenses.”

Moreover, P2 highlighted some of the key funding types to understand and effectively perform program capacity reviews, including restricted and unrestricted funds. According to P2, most program-related funds are restricted, which may have an adverse

impact on operational capabilities due to the inability to spend on other critical needs. P2 expressed that:

Yeah, we've got a lot of money in our restricted accounts, and the majority of it is stuff for government grants where, like, we have a large dental clinic project. And so, that's all sitting in the restricted accounts until we expend that.

According to Kim and Mason (2020), the combination of government funding and donations, which include both restricted and unrestricted funds, has an impact on operational program capacities. Some researchers found that high government funding may cause a decline in unrestricted donations, which inadvertently affects the program's operational capacity, especially during economic crises (Prentice & Clerkin, 2023).

Similar to Theme 1, P3 shared that O3's core programs include housing to prevent homelessness, shelter for homeless people, and services to formerly homeless individuals. P3 stated that:

So, you know, we're a basic needs organization with housing at our core. So, during both of those in 2008 and then again in 2020, and again since then, people's housing has been, making sure that people are able to maintain housing, has been critical. We also operate a shelter and services for individuals that were formerly homeless.

P3 emphasized that O3's quick responsiveness, virtual technology, and outreach capabilities to work with community partners played key roles in maintaining programs' delivery capacities. P3 further elaborated:

So, we were able to respond to what we do. And because we have a reputation of doing outreach, we were able to, you know, work with other organizations to help with that. But I think, so for the organization during both of those times, we were able to really make, expand our services, and help the community. And I think the other piece of the responsiveness is, we like quickly on a dime, we're able to shift our staff into virtual work experience.

Additionally, as shared in Theme 1, P3 expressed the important role the additional government funds played in maintaining program service capacities. P3 explained:

The government really responded, our state, local, and federal government, really responded to make sure that individuals that are most at risk, people that are potentially living on the streets, were able to stay safe and healthy during the pandemic.

However, P3 pointed out that the type of government funding, whether cost reimbursement or fee-for-service contract services, may potentially impact programs' operational capacities. P3 explained that cost reimbursement funding is restricted to program costs only, and funds are drawn after proof of the actual expenses incurred. Consequently, the cost reimbursement funding, which is the largest part of government funding, may potentially hinder programs' operations if there is a lack of resources during economic crises. Whereas, according to P3, fee-for-service is performance-based, and fees are set at a fixed rate and unrestricted, leveraging possible operational revenues. P3 articulated that:

Yeah, I mean, most of the revenue that we receive is restricted for a purpose. We have a small percentage of our funding that is unrestricted, but because of the kind of history and the type of services that we deliver, most of it is, 'we will give you this contract, and you will provide this service'. So, it's in a structure that's called cost reimbursement. So, we have to draw that, we have to have the cost in order to draw down on a contract as opposed to a fee-for-service where you provide the service, and then you get paid, and it's at a set rate, so those are often opportunities for a nonprofit to be able to gain some addition to earn some money, whereas in in a cost reimbursement, basically, they're just covering their costs.

Piatak and Pettijohn (2021a) found that nonprofits that assume initial risk in government funding, such as cost reimbursement, have more vulnerable program capacities during economic uncertainties. Additionally, Chen (2021) suggested that organizational program capacities depend on unrestricted revenues such as operating funds or fixed-cost agreements, including performance-based contracts.

P4 elaborated that O4's program services are based mainly on responses to economic downturns, particularly individuals in sectors impacted by high unemployment. Furthermore, P4 emphasized that well-resourced management to review internal and external challenges and opportunities is critical to maintaining programs' capacities during economic crises. P4 shared that:

Usually when there's an economic downturn, our organization tends to flourish. So, when unemployment is high, we get money to help people navigate the unemployment system. COVID hit, right, and unemployment was close to an all-

time high, I think we received a \$53 million contract to help agriculture workers during this time. So, during economic crises, and this is not the first time this has happened, when tragedy kind of hits externally, some nonprofits seem to gain opportunities. We have meetings pretty much every week, and we discuss always internal and external factors what's going on in the world? How is it going to affect us? Where opportunities are. We also have larger discussions with like program directors and managers.

Additionally, P4 highlighted the importance of updating the board of directors about the progress of program services for input or support and shared that “we report to the board if there are new projects that we're working on or have some of the contracts been renewed. And if we decide to invest in something different or new, you know, then we will discuss.”

Similar to all previous participants, P4 pointed out that the type of government funding agreement is crucial to building and maintaining program service capacities. For instance, P4 explained that O4's contract services are mainly based on performance before payment, which requires substantial operational resources to achieve results.

P4 shared, “we have performance contracts, if we don't perform, we don't get paid. So, we have this reserve, and we need this reserve because sometimes contracts, when you get them, they don't pay you advance.” Some researchers argued that most nonprofits that fail during economic crises lack sufficient organizational capacities, such as operating reserves, to maintain program services (Mitchell & Calabrese, 2019). Furthermore, Kotsi et al. (2023) asserted that assessing program, administrative, and



fundraising resource allocations are critical determinants of potential organizational resiliency, especially during economic downturns.

### ***Organizational Records Analysis and Methodological Triangulation***

I performed methodological triangulation utilizing data from Theme 1's financial analysis and the program services information of O1, O2, O3, and O4. Through a comprehensive analysis of all available data and records, I validated the responses of my participants regarding the reviews of program services they shared. I compared the financial and program services data between 2019 and 2021 to analyze the trends using a similar program-driven expense methodology.

Utilizing program-expenses analysis data and related reports from audited financial reports and Form 990s, I was able to validate O1's program service information that P1 had shared. Consistent with P1's responses, I confirmed the key program service information and the impacts of the pandemic on the individual program capacities of O1. For instance, I identified that some of O1's core programs included various capacity-building technical assistance to nonprofits, such as sustainable housing and financial education programs. Furthermore, program-related expenses rose by about 20% over the period due to the increased operational demands for core services related to the pandemic. As P1 shared, there were both up and down trends within the program-specific expense category, reflecting the resource allocation adjustments to meet operational capacities. For example, technical assistance costs to help nonprofits prevent evictions and other human crisis support rose by about 30%, whereas general administration dropped by about 75%.

Furthermore, as P1 emphasized, I identified very minimal resources allocated to internal capacity building with no reserves for economic shocks due to insufficient unrestricted operational funding. As P1 shared in Theme 1, I confirmed through the programs' expenses that the government PPP emergency funds facilitated the programs' operational capacities of O1 during the pandemic. Additionally, according to Bryan et al.'s (2021) findings, the roles of learning culture, strategic planning, technology, and staffing allocated resources improve programs' operational capacities. Moreover, Kniffin et al. (2021) suggested that collaborative program resource management approaches, such as partnership outreach programs, support programs' operational capacities during economic crises.

Likewise, using Theme 1's financial data and the programs' information provided, I was able to validate the reliability of the program service resource capacities as shared by P2. By evaluating O2's organizational records and utilizing a similar program-related approach as with O1, I confirmed the various core programs and the corresponding expense-level impacts of the pandemic, as P2 shared. For instance, I validated that the core programs included food and healthcare, youth and family, and various community services, as P2 expressed. Furthermore, I found that the overall program service expenses decreased by about 10% due to service reductions caused by insufficient operational resources to maintain program levels. Although, on average, all program activities declined, as noted, at the peak of the pandemic in 2020, family-related services rose to about 22% before returning to pre-pandemic levels. As P2 emphasized, during the pandemic, some critical programs, such as the transportation of people,

increased significantly, which reflected the sudden rise in operational costs. Additionally, besides the service reductions, I observed that the PPP funds also contributed to the programs' operational capacities due to decreased donations and a lack of operating reserves.

Similar to O1, I found that the lack of resources budgeted for programs' capacity building, no reserves for economic uncertainties, and insufficient unrestricted operational funding undermined O2's program capacities. As P2 underpinned, a detailed understanding of budget items, such as discretionary (negotiable) and nondiscretionary (nonnegotiable), played key roles in O2's limited program resource management. Furthermore, as P2 suggested, funding agreements, such as restricted and unrestricted funding, have an impact on successful programs' capacity management during economic downturns. Johnson et al. (2021) found that many U.S.-based nonprofits, particularly small community-based organizations, face growing operational funding constraints, limiting programs' capacities. Also, Prentice and Clerkin (2023) underpinned the importance of reviewing the impacts of financing acquisition types and operations to effectively maintain programs' capacities during economic crises.

Using a similar data analysis method, I used for O1 and O2, I confirmed O3's program service information shared by P3. I determined that O3's main program services are focused on providing housing-related assistance to prevent homelessness or to homeless people. Analyzing the financial data from Theme 1 and the programs' information available, I verified the significant increases in O3's program services and the corresponding expenses. Consistent with the information expressed by P3, O3's

program-related expenses rose by an estimated 530%. As P3 explained, the sharp demands for program services caused by the pandemic required an urgent need to increase operational resources to maintain programs' capacities. Also, O3's government-funded individuals and family housing services increased sharply by an estimated 3312%, accounting for approximately 81% (from about 14% pre-pandemic) of programs' category items.

Additionally, I noted that the sharp rise in individual and family housing services confirmed the pandemic's severe economic impact on housing and O3's quick outreach. For instance, as P3 shared, I found that O3's community activities increased through collaboration and partnership programs to maintain the programs' capacities during the pandemic. For instance, I found an increase of about 386% allocated to community partners providing services to individuals and families facing potential safety and welfare concerns. In agreement with Chen (2021), O3's ability to maintain programs' capacities during the pandemic depended on the organization's resiliency, including size and equity. Furthermore, Waerder et al. (2022) found that the collaboration of nonprofits with external organizations facilitates overcoming programs' resources, stability, and resource-based challenges.

Similarly, I used Theme 1's financial and program service data compared between 2019 and 2021 to verify the program's capacity information P4 shared. As P4 pointed out, I noted that O4's key program services involved unemployment assistance, with an emphasis on workforce development, childcare, and homelessness prevention support. For example, due to the increased demand by families for childcare payment support

through lost wages, O4's childcare costs increased by about 317% during the pandemic. Furthermore, homelessness prevention, shelter, and various health and welfare programs' costs increased by about 47%. Also, I noted that O4's programs' expenses for workforce development and other job re-entry programs increased by about 27% in 2021, after the pandemic's peak in 2020. Similar to O3, O4 obtained additional government funding to maintain program service capacities. For instance, I discovered an estimated 100% increase in both government funding and the corresponding program's expenses to support operational capacities during the economic downturn.

Furthermore, as P4 shared, I identified O4's 2-year government award of about \$56 million to develop housing programs per audit disclosure without any related expenses. Consistent with P4, I noted that the inability to find a housing expert explained the reasons for the lack of capacity for any related activities. Overall, similar to O3, I found that O4's size, equity, past surpluses, and operating reserves improved the programs' operational capacities during the pandemic. In agreement, Chen (2021) argued that nonprofits' organizational capacities and abilities or programs' resilience depend on factors such as equity, surplus, size, and commercial revenues. Additionally, Mitchell and Calabrese (2019) asserted that organizational capacity determines nonprofits' ability to survive and maintain program service capacities during economic downturns.

### ***Correlation to the Literature***

In addition to focusing on financial and human resource management to achieve organizational sustainability, evaluating program service capacity emerged as critical to assessing organizational sustainability. Kotsi et al. (2023) argued that evaluating

program, administrative, and fundraising resource allocations are crucial determinants of expected organizational resilience, particularly during economic downturns. Bryan et al. (2021) concurred that program service evaluation is a key instrument for assessing the sustainability of an organization's program; however, the majority of small nonprofits lack the necessary organizational capacities.

Moreover, according to Kim and Mason (2020), the proportion of restricted and unrestricted funds from the government and donations, respectively, affects operational program capacities. For example, Prentice and Clerkin (2023) discovered that high government funding may reduce unrestricted donations, which inadvertently affects the operational capacity of the program, particularly during economic crises. Furthermore, Piatak and Pettijohn (2021a) discovered that nonprofits that accept initial risk in government funding, such as cost reimbursement, have more vulnerable program capacities during economic uncertainty. Additionally, Kniffin et al. (2021) proposed that collaborative program-resource management strategies, such as partnership outreach programs, enhance the operational capacities of programs during economic downturns. Waerder et al. (2022) discovered, for instance, that collaboration between nonprofits and external organizations facilitates overcoming program resource, stability, and expertise-based obstacles.

### ***Correlation to the Conceptual Framework***

Overall, Theme 3 also correlates to Burns' (1978) transformational leadership theory due to this framework's ability for leaders to inspire followers to achieve common goals. Theme 3's key alignments linking programs' capacities with transformational

leadership include factors such as learning culture, outreach, and structural innovation to achieve organizational resilience. The key concepts of transformational leadership theory, which include idealized influences, inspirational motivation, intellectual simulations, and individualized esteem, enable leaders to achieve desired organizational change. Purwanto et al. (2023) proposed that transformational leadership influences organizational learning culture and structure, whereas organizational learning culture and structure significantly affect programs' innovation capacities. Additionally, Purwanto et al. emphasized that flexibility, openness, talent, strategic planning, size, and technology are all factors that affect transformational leaders' ability to achieve organizational capacities.

#### **Theme 4: Maintain Internal Systems and Infrastructure**

The fourth key theme that emerged from data analysis was that effective nonprofit leaders maintained internal systems and infrastructure to achieve financial sustainability. I observed that this study's participants linked internal systems primarily when referencing policies and procedures that relate to organizational resource management practices or processes. In referencing infrastructure, participants mostly referred to the resources available or needed to effectively maintain organizational resource management capacities. In this context, the *internal systems* also refer to the organizational systems or processes, and the *infrastructure* refers to the organizational resources or structures. I found that the internal systems and infrastructure, or *organizational systems* and *structures*, defined the basis of the key themes and the intermediary factors that emerged.

Furthermore, I noted that all my participants, particularly P1, P2, and P4, underpinned the vital use of internal systems and infrastructure to effectively achieve organizational goals. Although P3 expressed similar opinions about the importance of internal systems and infrastructure, the other participants were more specific with the terminologies. For instance, P3 described the organizational DNA that enabled O3 to maintain organizational capacities without using the more generalized terminologies of "organizational culture or structure." Moreover, P1 and P2 expressed difficulties in effectively maintaining some internal systems and infrastructure due to their small organizational sizes and limited resources. Additionally, all participants, particularly P1, P2, and P3, emphasized the role or potential of collaborating or outsourcing some infrastructure to achieve organizational objectives and sustainability. Furthermore, I noted that the internal systems and infrastructure of O3 and O4 were more resilient due to their larger organizational capacities to maintain increased demand.

### ***Participants' Responses and Thematic Outcome Analysis***

P1 expressed that O1's organizational sustainability depends primarily on creating processes, procedures, and infrastructure, particularly around financial and operational resource management, to achieve organizational goals. Moreover, P1 highlighted that the type of primary funding source or contract agreement, such as restricted or restricted grants, impacts organizational systems and structures. For instance, P1 elaborated that restricted funds are mostly program-specific, such as cost reimbursement contracts, and may be spent only on that program. Additionally, P1 emphasized that various internally



generated unrestricted income streams, such as membership fees, fiscal sponsorships, and fundraising, improve organizational capacity building and sustainability. P1 shared that:

A lot of our funding is grants, and they're very specific. So, some are reimbursement based and that means they're tied to a specific activity, people, and, like, we have to spend the money, and then get reimbursed for the money. Others are tied to a very specific program. And so, I think the main strategy is really thinking about what we can do when it comes to unrestricted. But for us, you know, financial sustainability really comes from our ability, I think membership dues are part of that, like so our ability to consistently make the case that we are worth investing in as a membership association, then, fiscal sponsorship contracts, same thing, and then any sort of operational dollars. That provides that operational funding, if you will, that's not really restricted.

Furthermore, P1 emphasized that the most vital thing is to focus on improving internal capacity through a continuous learning culture to achieve successful organizational innovations and sustainability. However, P1 acknowledged that for small nonprofits, such as O1, it is hard to maintain internal capacity, which requires continuous innovations, especially during economic downturns. P1 articulated:

I think the biggest one is just internal capacity. So, I think it's just the capacity piece of being able to focus on nonprofit operations and strengthening what you're doing and being in continuous learning, that is hard when you're small. Thinking around sustainability for me comes down to really spending time creating procedures and processes, and infrastructure around operations and financials that

are bigger than any one person. It's like right now I'm the kind of person who has the skills and doing all but when I leave somebody needs to, whoever is behind me, needs to be able to use this infrastructure versus building it.

Similar to Theme 1, P1 emphasized that small nonprofits may strengthen internal systems by outsourcing some administrative infrastructure to focus on strengthening internal capacities. P1 suggested that outsourcing some of the processes may free some time to focus on creating internal review tools to effectively administer internal systems and infrastructure. P1 shared, "I don't have like an HR department. I outsource it. I have a bookkeeper comes in. Then strengthening our internal processes around reviewing financial policies and procedures. So, we do the compliance internally."

Furthermore, P1 pointed out some key internal review tools nonprofits may develop or use to provide internal and external stakeholders with reliable compliance and oversight information. For instance, P1 suggested some assessment tools, such as dashboards, financial ratio templates, pie charts, and relationship mapping facilitators, as useful to strengthen internal processes. Additionally, P1 suggested that maintaining compliance through reliable internal systems may encourage some funders to exempt expensive full-scale audit requirements, particularly for small nonprofits. P1 stated that:

And so, how are we doing in terms of achieving our strategic goals that we set up looking forward? I think dashboards are really good tools. You have to create it and spend the time to do it. We probably don't need a full-scale audit anymore. We're not that big and they're getting more expensive. You know, in terms of financial sustainability, I'm like, I don't know if it makes sense for us to spend that

much money on an audit, when we are not even required to do it by law, you know. We don't get federal dollars for that full huge audit. We have lots of templates that we use like cash flow template. Also, the organizational chart and the governors' chart might be helpful to you. Our strategic planning facilitator shared with us was a relationship mapping tool. To internally think about who are we working with? Should we be working with? Should we have partnerships?

And we're modifying that to suit like for membership outreach and other things.

Additionally, Rottkamp (2021) argued that nonprofit leaders who do not have systems to adapt quickly through continuous learning and organizational innovation fail to survive economic shocks. Similarly, Jaskyte (2020) asserted that, compared to other key infrastructure innovations such as technology, organizational innovation is a crucial predictor of financial performance and sustainability.

P2 emphasized that O2's internal systems and infrastructure are developed mainly around prudent organizational finance management involving budget projections, monitoring, and adjustments to maintain organizational sustainability. I noted that P2 described the financial management procedures as critical, referencing spreadsheets as the primary tool for tightly tracking financial operations to make necessary adjustments. P2 shared that:

So, we do a lot of forecasting and so, that's, the monitoring, forecasting, and projecting processes and procedures, really important. Really have like a very detailed spreadsheet just to make sure that we're tracking everything because we don't want to over predict and get ourselves in trouble. Is just really tracking our,

you know, the income that we expect to come in. We don't have any fee structure or payment due system where people pay us, like that's not how our nonprofit is. So, it's mostly goodwill donations. A lot of projecting, a lot of tracking of things, and then making adjustments.

Similar to Theme 1, P2 expressed the important role the board of directors plays in the financial management process, especially relating to discretionary expense decisions. P2 stated that “for benefits, so like our retirement benefit, that's a process or something that the board is discretionary on every year, whether we can do it or not.”

Moreover, P2 highlighted some key innovative practices, such as revenue stream diversification and unrestricted operational fund development, to effectively maintain organizational sustainability. P2 explained that:

We've tried to always have anywhere between six to twelve different revenue streams. So, if one dried up, we weren't left in a pickle of the situation, and so we've really tried to diversify. Also, we've tried to increase unrestricted operational fund capacity.

Additionally, P2 pointed out that outsourcing some infrastructure to contract services, such as housekeeping, helped O2 maintain its organizational capacity during previous economic downturns. P2 articulated that, “sometimes it's cheaper to have contract employees or contract vendors than actual employees. So, we did that probably around 2008, 2009 and afterwards, when we had housekeeping staff, and it was just more affordable to just bring in cleaners.”

Furthermore, P2 acknowledged that the impact of the pandemic required effective organizational change management through various innovations, including some restructuring, to maintain organizational sustainability. P2 shared that:

So through COVID, we made, we were able to make a lot of great adjustments.

We're going through a rebrand, a restructuring, a strategic plan that is causing shifts in the work that we're doing. There's a lot of uncertainty. So, I mean it's a big change.

Jaskyte (2020) agreed that organizational innovation through effective change management is a significant predictor of financial performance and sustainability, particularly during economic crises. Furthermore, Kotsi et al. (2023) argued that organizational capacity building should include a strong program, administrative, and fundraising infrastructure to effectively maintain financial sustainability.

P3 narrated that the basis of O3's organizational structure is built around the organization's learning culture and history to respond quickly to emergency human crises. Furthermore, P3 shared that housing is at the core of O3's organizational systems and infrastructure development, with the capabilities to quickly adapt and reach out. Also, P3 underpinned the importance of organizational innovations to work with community partners to deliver core services, especially during human crises, to maintain organizational sustainability. P3 articulated that:

We've always been, or our history and our reputation is really being able to be nimble and adjust as things change, and to respond to the external conditions. So, you know, we're a basic needs organization with housing at our core. The

organization was created to handle, to work with people during crisis. So, I think that's kind of in our DNA is to be able to respond and, kind of roll up our sleeves and do our services, and work with other community partners and make sure that we're able to be there and be responsive. So, it's part of the strategic plan in our DNA, it is mostly long-term planning. And what we learned, the team that is with me now, our Chief Operating Officer and our CFO, as we know that things are going to start to constrict with the end of the COVID-19 pandemic, started strategic planning, and just learning from what we experienced.

As a human service and employee-driven nonprofit, P3 expressed the key role innovative staffing strategies play, especially with nontraditional employees, to achieve organizational sustainability. P3 explained further that:

We're also getting creative with our staffing approaches. I think that we learned that it was great to have, you know, people coming on board and kind of that were nontraditional but that, in order for this to really be successful, that we needed to invest in the training and the onboarding processes.

Additionally, P3 highlighted the impacts of financing types, including restricted, unrestricted, and overall compositions of governmental and private funds, on organizational structures and sustainability. Particularly, P3 elaborated that most of the government funding is offered as restricted for specific purposes, requiring continuous organizational innovations to maintain organizational sustainability. For instance, P3 shared that most of O3's funds are government-restricted contracts specific to housing programs, and some are composed of private and foundational funds. P3 stated:

So, our revenue composition is, I would say, it's about 80%, eighty to 85% government. We do have some private contracts and then we get Foundation and private donor support. The majority of the income we earn is restricted for a purpose. Only a small portion of our money is unrestricted, but given our history and the services we offer, the majority of it is in the form of contracts that state, "We will give you this contract, and you will provide this service." So, it's under a structure that's called cost reimbursement. Therefore, in order to draw down on a contract, we must have the cost as opposed to a fee for service, where you provide the service and are paid at a set rate. As a result, those are frequently opportunities for a nonprofit to be able to gain additional income, whereas in a cost reimbursement, they are essentially just covering their costs.

Furthermore, P3 elaborated that payment terms and conditions, such as cost reimbursement or performance-based agreements, may require organizational changes to maintain organizational sustainability. For example, P3 described that as the pandemic's contracts decreased, O3's leadership team started a strategic plan through restructuring to readjust and reduce costs. P3 articulated that:

What happened the last time was that we waited too long, so really having the foresight to, identify areas that we can reduce expenses quickly and then making those you know, not wringing your hands and waiting, then make those changes quickly. Because the longer you wait, the more of a hole you get yourself into. And the strategy that we employed at that point was, we went through a restructuring due to the loss of several contracts.

Piatak and Pettijohn (2021a) asserted that nonprofits should assess the potential risk and relationship implications of funding agreements on organizational structure and sustainability before acceptance or implementation. Additionally, Purwanto (2023) proposed that organizational learning culture, innovations, strategic planning, adaptability, and infrastructure have significant impacts on organizational management capacities and sustainability.

P4 emphasized that strong internal systems and infrastructure, particularly continuous organizational innovations and change management capacities, provide the foundation for O4's organizational sustainability. According to P4, O4's infrastructure capacities include finance, resource development and planning, IT, and legal departments' weekly meetings for organizational sustainability discussions. Similar to O3, P4 shared that O4's infrastructure conversations are focused on strategic planning and finding innovative ways to maintain critical staffing positions and sustain organizational capacities. P4 shared that:

So, in general, I think that what we want to do as an agency is maintain our infrastructure, you know, to make sure that we have enough resources to sustain, our financial department, which is critical, our resource development in planning, because we need to always be looking at opportunities, and then obviously IT, financial, if I mentioned it, and legal. So, we have this group that we meet with every Tuesday, and we're always discussing external situations, of course, internal situations, and so the strategy of course is to maintain that synergy to make sure we don't lose staff during tough times.



Moreover, P4 emphasized the key role the board of directors plays in the organizational structure, particularly in fiscal oversight, contracts, and investment matters. P4 shared that, “we discuss with our board monthly projects, what we're working on, and contracts’ updates, cost of potential investments, then, we discuss about what the return would be, and how we measure each one including using financial ratios.”

Consistent with all my participants, P4 also emphasized that the financing type, particularly government funding contract agreements, is critical to the organizational structure and sustainability. For example, P4 shared that O4’s contract agreements include cost-reimbursements and performance-based agreements, both requiring substantial infrastructural resources to meet desired outcomes before payments. P4 shared:

It’s like, 50% of our funding is cost reimbursement, and 50% is based on your performance. You get paid when somebody does this. So, in actuality, I think it's next week, we're going to probably have a meeting to discuss one of the divisions that's affected by poor performance. But then, we have HR in there, planning, operations, the CEO, finance. So, all of us, along with the operations that are feeling the pain, we're all going to talk about, what are the possibilities? Let's talk about options, and why is one organization doing fine, and we're not, kind of things.

Moreover, P4 also expressed the need for learning culture and the ability to adapt to organizational changes in maintaining organizational sustainability, particularly during external economic uncertainties. P4 stated that:

You know it's a bit, it's about shifting gears. So, if we have a plan in place and we have to shift gears again, we discuss it as a group. And we discuss who it's going to affect and how that will trickle down. Like with any change. So, it's kind of more like a change model. What changes need to happen, and then just kind of follow it through, how is that going to affect people? How's it going to affect their work?

Bagga et al. (2023) found that the pandemic's impact revealed a positive and significant correlation between organizational adaptive change management culture and organizational resilience. Additionally, Kotsi et al. (2023) agreed that organizational infrastructure capacities, including program, administrative, and financial management resources, determine organizational resiliency, especially during economic downturns.

#### ***Organizational Records Analysis and Methodological Triangulation***

Overall, the internal systems and infrastructure, as I noted from the participants' responses, formed the basis of the organizations' themes and mediating factors identified. Using data analysis from the previous themes and the documentation obtained for Theme 4, I confirmed through methodological triangulation the participants' information shared. I compared the organizational best practices regarding policies and procedures reported in the audited financials and resource capacity data using the expense-allocation analysis approach. I analyzed the organizations' administrative and operational resource capacities involving, particularly, capacity building, fundraising, program, and human resource expenses between 2019 and 2021.

Consistent with P1's information shared, using organizational data available, I validated O1's internal systems and infrastructure information, particularly the innovative strategies to maintain organizational sustainability. Foremost, I confirmed that O1's organizational systems focused on continuous innovations, including exploring, adding, or improving organizational processes and new resources to maintain organizational sustainability. For instance, as P1 shared, I identified new partnership programs and cost reallocations, particularly relating to collaborations with nonprofits to minimize the pandemic's financial hardships. Some of O1's innovative collaborative approaches included various organizational changes and infrastructural resources to provide partners with emergency housing and financial education technical assistance. Consistently, the programs' operational expenditures increased by about 20%, technical assistance to nonprofit partners increased by about 30%, and administrative costs decreased by almost 75%.

Moreover, I found limited resources allocated to O1's capacity-building infrastructure to support the organizational learning culture, innovations, and strategic planning processes to maintain organizational sustainability. Nonetheless, I observed that O1's organizational culture for continuous learning, innovations, and collaborations, as P1 expressed, facilitated maintaining organizational sustainability. For instance, with limited resources, O1 adapted quickly to virtual technology to conduct various activities, including fundraising, training, and internal meetings, to maintain organizational sustainability. In agreement, Bryan et al. (2021) asserted the vital role of learning culture in building organizational change capacity to achieve or maintain organizational

sustainability. Additionally, Kniffin et al. (2021) argued that collaborative program resource capacities, such as partnership programs' infrastructural resources, support organizational resilience during economic crises.

Similarly, using organizational data and documentation obtained, I validated the reliability of O2's internal systems and infrastructure information shared by P2. Evaluating O2's organizational records and utilizing a similar program-related expense analysis approach, I confirmed the organizational systems and resources that enabled organizational sustainability. I found that O2's systems and infrastructure are focused on fiscal discipline, particularly budget projections, tight monitoring, and quick adjustments to maintain organizational sustainability. Additionally, as P2 shared, I observed fluctuations in the administrative and program allocations based on continuous monitoring and adjustments due to the unpredictable incomes during the pandemic. For instance, overall, all programs declined; however, at the peak of the pandemic, family-related services rose to about 22% before returning to previous levels. Also, as P2 shared, I observed salary-related expenses increasing by about 19% to accommodate rising costs before being readjusted to previous levels through various administrative and program adjustments. Additionally, I noted that the loss of donations and the PPP fund requirements impacted O2's organizational restructuring after the adaptations to maintain organizational sustainability.

Furthermore, I found a lack of resources allocated to organizational capacity building and limited unrestricted operational funds affected O2's organizational infrastructure to maintain organizational sustainability. Also, I found that the deep

understanding of funding and allocation types by O2's leaders significantly affected organizational fiscal discipline and sustainability during the pandemic. For instance, due to unrestricted funding constraints, O2 went through organizational restructuring impacted by funding and allocation limitations, including a restricted dental fund's feasibility assessment. Amble (2023) agreed that fiscal responsibility plays a key role in an organization's foundation to build organizational resilience against external economic uncertainties. Moreover, Prentice and Clerkin (2023) underpinned the importance of reviewing the impacts of financing acquisition agreements to effectively maintain organizational sustainability during economic crises.

Applying a similar data analysis approach used for O1 and O2, I confirmed O3's organizational systems and infrastructure information shared by P3. I found that the organizational culture and infrastructural capacities built to swiftly provide interventions during human crises enabled O3 to maintain organizational sustainability. For instance, as P3 described, I found that O3's program-related expenses rose abruptly by an estimated 530% in 2020, at the peak of the pandemic. As P3 explained, the sharp demands for core services caused by the pandemic required an urgent need to quickly increase organizational resources to maintain programs' infrastructural capacities. Particularly, O3's government-funded housing and homelessness services increased sharply by an estimated 3312%, accounting for approximately 81% of total programs' expenses, from about 14% previously. Further, I observed that the steep increase in individual and family housing services confirmed P3's report of the pandemic's severe economic impact on homelessness prevention.

Furthermore, I found that O3's community outreach activities increased through collaborations and partnerships to help maintain organizational capacities and sustainability during the pandemic. For example, I observed an approximately 386% increase in funding allocated to community partners who provide shelter to people facing potential safety and welfare concerns, including domestic violence victims. Additionally, I noted that the funding arrangements, particularly the governmental funds' payment terms and conditions, contributed to some of O3's organizational changes to maintain operational capabilities. For instance, as P3 shared, because cost reimbursements required fronting initial costs and were restricted to specific programs, expenses were directly allocated as O3's operational costs. However, I noted that O3's performance-based costs, without proof of upfront cost requirements, were subcontracted through partnerships and, accordingly, recorded under contract services. Piatak and Pettijohn (2021a) emphasized that differences in government funding agreements significantly affect organizational structures and change management capacities to maintain organizational sustainability. Furthermore, Waerder et al. (2021) found that nonprofits' collaboration with partner organizations facilitates overcoming organizational scarce resources and change management limitations to achieve financial sustainability.

Similar to the data analysis approach I used for all my organizations (O1, O2, and O3), I verified O4's internal systems and infrastructure responses P4 provided. I confirmed that O4's internal systems and infrastructure were developed mainly around organizational innovations and resource-based capabilities, particularly staffing, to provide unemployment-related assistance. Also, I noted that the flexibility of

management to shift gears through strategic planning and adjustments improved O4's internal systems and infrastructure to maintain organizational sustainability. For instance, O4's management quickly allocated more resources to childcare, by about 317%, due to the increased demand by families for support during the pandemic. Further, I found that management allocated about 47% more resources to support people facing housing, health, and various potential risks due to the pandemic. Additionally, I observed that workforce development resources rose by an estimated 27% to support job re-entry programs just as the pandemic was contained in 2021. By swiftly adjusting limited resources to critical need allocations, management enhanced O4's internal systems and infrastructure capacities to provide core services and maintain organizational sustainability.

Furthermore, I verified, based on various policy and procedure disclosures available, the active role of O4's executive board in the strategic planning and fiscal decision-making processes. Similarly, I noted that the funding agreements, especially the governmental processes, impacted O4's operational infrastructure through some of the organizational resource adjustments to maintain organizational sustainability. Also, I found that, similar to O3, O4's organizational size, investment equity, and operating reserves enhanced the organizational capacities during the pandemic. Bagga et al. (2023) agreed that organizational innovations and learning culture can significantly impact the organizational change management capacity to achieve organizational sustainability during uncertainties. Additionally, Kotsi et al. (2023) argued that organizational

infrastructure, such as program, administrative, and fundraising capacities, plays a central role in surviving during economic downturns.

### ***Correlation to the Literature***

The internal systems and infrastructure form the organizational foundation, which involves all three emerged topics, including the financial, human, and program resources' management capacities. In summary, the internal systems and infrastructure provide the basis for organizations to effectively maintain organizational sustainability, particularly during economic downturns. Some key factors that significantly impacted organizational systems and structures included (a) change management, (b) organizational culture, (c) funding capacity and agreement types, and (d) outreach and partnerships.

Some researchers asserted that change management systems and infrastructure are critical to maintaining organizational sustainability, particularly during economic crises (Bryan et al., 2021; Purwanto, 2023). Furthermore, Rottkamp (2021) emphasized the important roles strategic planning and management systems' infrastructure play in change management to achieve sustainable organizational goals and objectives. Additionally, Bagga et al. (2023) and Jaskyte (2020) argued that organizational systems and infrastructure capacities depend on organizational culture, especially continuous learning and innovations, to achieve organizational sustainability. Also, Amble (2023) found that fiscal discipline, particularly involving the executive board's oversight, is critical to maintaining effective organizational resource management processes and infrastructure.

Moreover, Chen (2021) proposed that maintaining organizational systems and infrastructure involves building sufficient funding capacities, such as operating funds,



equity, and reserves, to weather economic uncertainties. Additionally, Piatak and Pettijohn (2021a) asserted that funding agreements, such as cost reimbursement and performance-based funding types, significantly impact organizational systems, structures, and sustainability. Furthermore, Prentice and Clerkin (2023) argued that donation types, such as restricted or unrestricted operating fund donations, can considerably affect organizational systems and infrastructure in maintaining organizational sustainability. Prentice and Clerkin, for instance, found that a substantial government financing structure lowers unrestricted donations, which indirectly undermines the organization's operational infrastructure, particularly during economic downturns.

Piatak and Pettijohn (2021a) argued that nonprofits that accept initial risks in funding, such as fronting initial costs, are more susceptible to infrastructural failure amidst economic instability. Moreover, Kniffin et al. (2021) suggested that collaborative organizational resource management, such as outreach partnerships or infrastructure outsourcing, can improve organizational sustainability during economic downturns. Additionally, Waerder et al. (2022) found that collaborative organizational management systems, such as community outreach partnerships, facilitate overcoming resource-based obstacles to maintain organizational sustainability.

### ***Correlation to the Conceptual Framework***

Theme 4 relates to Burns' (1978) transformational leadership theory because some key characteristics align with this framework's capacity to encourage followers to attain common goals. Some key characteristics that align with transformational leadership's capabilities include change management and organizational culture, such as

learning, innovations, and outreach, to achieve organizational sustainability. The key transformational leadership concepts, especially idealized influences and inspirational motivation, allow leaders to impact organizational culture and change management to achieve common goals.

Purwanto et al. (2023) posited that transformational leadership impacts organizational learning culture and structure, which significantly affects innovative changes to maintain organizational sustainability. Furthermore, Purwanto et al. suggested that factors such as flexibility, strategic planning, and size influence transformational leaders' ability to achieve common goals. Also, using organizational culture as a mediating role through virtual teams, Bagga et al. (2023) found a strong correlation between transformational leadership and management change systems and structures. Finally, Waerder et al. (2022) found that organizational systems involving collaborative outreach, which relate to transformational leadership's relationship-influential characteristics, are vital to achieving organizational sustainability goals.

### **Applications to Professional Practice**

Based on this study's findings, I found effective strategies some nonprofit business leaders use to maintain financial sustainability during economic downturns. I added to the existing literature the financial sustainability strategies of nonprofits with this research study's insights and findings, particularly during external economic shocks. Four main themes emerged from the central research question using the interviews with participants, NVivo 14 software, Microsoft Excel spreadsheets, and the documentation of

the organization. These themes are (a) oversights and operational funding, (b) human resources, (c) program services, and (d) internal systems and infrastructure.

The participants of this study shared ways nonprofit business leaders could increase internal systems' infrastructure, administration, and management resource capacities to maintain financial sustainability. The findings may be applicable to nonprofit organizations seeking to implement effective financial sustainability strategies to ensure organizational long-term resiliency, especially during economic downturns. Nonprofit leaders can learn strategies, particularly organizational capacity-building systems and infrastructure, to enhance financial, human, and program-service resource management for financial sustainability. Specifically, financial sustainability strategies are crucial for nonprofits' viability to continue delivering organizational mission services effectively, irrespective of external economic circumstances (Cantele & Zardini, 2020). Leaders of most sustainable nonprofits continuously seek funding and partnership opportunities to increase resources to maintain a sustainable organization, particularly during economic downturns (Peng et al., 2020a).

Moreover, by improving some key intermediary factors, such as organizational innovations and strategic planning, nonprofit leaders can strengthen internal systems and infrastructure to maintain organizational sustainability. For instance, nonprofit leaders may incorporate new technologies, such as Zoom, to facilitate operational demands and staff wellness, especially during economic crises, such as COVID-19. Some other important intermediary factors interrelated to successful strategies leaders should consider include communication, change management, organizational culture, trust in

management, and unrestricted funding to enhance organizational sustainability.

Furthermore, leaders may apply some of the conceptual framework characteristics of transformational leadership, particularly the ability to inspire and motivate followers to achieve organizational goals.

### **Implications for Social Change**

This study's results, recommendations, and conclusions could act as a catalyst for constructive societal change due to the critical roles nonprofits play in serving communities. Due to lack of effective financial sustainability strategies and limited funding opportunities, many nonprofits struggle to maintain or expand their organizational performance and resource capacity-building (Piatak & Pettijohn, 2021b). Sroufe and Gopalakrishna-Remani (2019) argued that the financial sustainability of a nonprofit organization is vital to its capacity to continuously provide critical societal services. The purpose of this study was to research strategies that some nonprofit leaders have successfully implemented to maintain financial sustainability, particularly during economic crises. The financial strategies the nonprofit leaders successfully applied in this study have the potential to enhance many nonprofits' organizational sustainability to serve their community citizens and positively affect social change. Some researchers argue that achieving nonprofits' financial sustainability through effective management strategies by maintaining administration, human, and program resources positively impacts social change in community development (Searing et al., 2021).

Moreover, nonprofits' policy advocacy groups may apply this study's results to promote awareness of the need for more resources toward financial sustainability

capacity-building and positive social impact. Bublitz et al. (2021) suggested that providing resource support to youth social enterprises could positively impact the development of ecosystems to empower youth social change agents. Additionally, nonprofit policy researchers may use the study's findings to highlight the limited research literature and resources available for more support regarding nonprofits' financial sustainability studies. For instance, social service nonprofits and stakeholders advocate for favorable financial sustainability policies that help explore capacity-building strategies to improve positive impact on community development (Cortis & Lee, 2019). Furthermore, advocating for more unrestricted funding from policymakers, such as adequate operational grants in performance-based contracts, may positively impact nonprofits' performance in their communities.

Additionally, the findings may inspire human resource policy stakeholders to ensure socially responsible labor practices that enhance overall positive impact on people's wellbeing and sustainable communities (Sorribes et al., 2021). Furthermore, building effective fiscal oversight capacity may not only improve fiscal discipline and compliance but could also increase public trust for potential collaboration and funding opportunities. Particularly with strong internal systems and fiscal infrastructure, nonprofits may encourage more business participation in corporate social responsibility initiatives and opportunities for societal benefits (Maktoufi et al., 2020).

By improving intermediary factors such as communication, change management, strategic planning, learning culture, innovations, and outreach partnerships, leaders can positively impact organizational sustainability and societal benefits. For instance,

nonprofits can apply various funding strategies to pursue additional unrestricted revenues, including fundraising, membership fees, and sponsorship opportunities, to increase societal impacts. By increasing unrestricted funds, nonprofits could become less reliant on public funding, which potentially allows governments' limited resources to support other critical public services (Cheng & Yang, 2019). Furthermore, this research study may encourage nonprofit leaders, particularly small nonprofits with limited resources, to seek strategic collaborations and partnerships to leverage scarce organizational resources, as Cortis and Lee (2019) recommended. For example, through collaborative approaches, such as outsourcing some program services and administrative infrastructure, nonprofit leaders could focus on strengthening organizational capacities and societal impacts (Peng et al., 2020a).

### **Recommendations for Action**

Nonprofit business leaders should carefully examine the findings of this study and consider evaluating the strategies used to maintain financial sustainability during economic downturns. Furthermore, nonprofit policy advocates and other influential stakeholders may find the strategies of this study important in shaping policies that address nonprofits' long-term sustainability challenges. Based on the four key themes that emerged and other intermediary factors, I suggest the following recommendations for action, to effectively maintain financial sustainability, particularly during economic crises:

1. Nonprofit leaders should ensure enough capacity-building management resources are available to maintain organizational sustainability. In this study,

I found from data analysis that nonprofits, especially small organizations, are less resilient to economic crises due to limited capacity-building resources. For instance, nonprofit leaders should ensure enough capacity-building management resources are included in program contracts, before agreeing, to achieve organizational sustainability. The capacity-building process requires resources to create, implement, and maintain organizational systems and infrastructure, including administration capacity, to effectively deliver societal services (Chen, 2021). Particularly, nonprofit leaders should assess the internal resources available to support capacity-building for fundraising, strategic planning, change management, partnerships, and innovations to maintain organizational sustainability (Searing et al., 2021). Based on this study's findings, successful nonprofits implement endowments and long-term investments as contingency plans to weather economic storms. Furthermore, vulnerable nonprofits, usually new and small community organizations, should avoid funding agreements with cash or in-kind matching requirements to mitigate further administrative constraints.

2. Nonprofit leaders should create strong but easy-to-follow policies and procedures that ensure all staff can apply effectively to perform their duties and responsibilities. The key policies and procedures should include administration, financial, personnel, and operational guidelines to effectively manage resources to maintain financial sustainability, particularly during economic downturns. Additionally, leaders should provide continuous

personal and professional training and development opportunities for staff to improve their skills and understanding of organizational policies and processes. By providing support opportunities, staff will improve job performance, trust in management, wellness, and long-term employment commitment due to a better understanding of organizational duties and responsibilities (Soto et al., 2021). Additionally, leaders should invest in staff onboarding training processes by ensuring strong human resource management infrastructure to effectively enhance employees' job performance and satisfaction.

3. Nonprofit leaders should seek unrestricted fundraising opportunities and ensure that program service contracts include adequate unrestricted funding to meet needed capacity-building and management resources. Based on this study's findings, the four nonprofits lacked enough capacity-building resources, due to limited unrestricted funding, to optimize their societal mission obligations, as recommended by Prentices and Clerkin (2023). Some sources of unrestricted revenues nonprofit leaders should consider include membership fees, fundraising campaign events, crowdfunding, social enterprises like Goodwill stores, and fiscal sponsorship programs.
4. Nonprofit leaders, especially in new and small organizations, should reach out and leverage strategic partnerships with community partners that align with their missions' goals and objectives. Some key strategic partnerships that nonprofit leaders should consider include program collaborations,



infrastructure outsourcing, CSR initiatives, and fiscal sponsorships. Nonprofit leaders should review contracts lacking adequate internal capacities to operate effectively and find collaborative partners with efficient infrastructure to minimize operational and overhead costs (Trejo-Pech et al., 2023).

5. Nonprofit leaders and key stakeholders, including policy advocates, policymakers, research and training institutions, regulators, and the mainstream media, should support sustainability public policies. This study's findings underscore the importance of adequately investing in nonprofits' sustainability public policy initiatives to enhance capacity-building resources for organizational longevity and resilience. Some researchers argue that due to limited sustainability studies and innovations, nonprofits are still using traditional philanthropy regulations and practices that are no longer effective (Mitchell & Calabrese, 2019). Furthermore, Mitchell and Calabrese (2019) emphasized that nonprofits are mostly assessed using for-profits' financial profitability standards due to limited foundational financial sustainability models warranting needed public policy resources.

I will provide a 1–2-page summary of this study's findings to every participant. Furthermore, I intend to use various online and traditional channels to disseminate the study's results to reach a wider audience for potential action on the recommendations. I plan to use communication media including a dedicated discussion website, social media, and virtual and in-person events. Additionally, I plan to disseminate this research study on the ProQuest database of dissertations and theses to expand its readership.

Furthermore, I intend to present a concise copy of this study to an academic journal for evaluation and possible dissemination.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

The purpose of this qualitative multicase study was to explore the strategies that some nonprofit business leaders use to maintain financial sustainability during economic downturns. This study's results are constrained in their extent, thus necessitating additional research to explore other strategies that nonprofit leaders could use to maintain financial sustainability during economic downturns. Based on this study's findings, I recommend the following actions for further research:

1. The target population consisted of four business leaders from four different 501(c)(3) nonprofits in the State of Wisconsin with successful strategies to maintain financial sustainability during economic downturns, allowing them to survive the Great Recession of 2008–2009. Future research should be extended outside of the State of Wisconsin. I recommend replications in other geographic regions because of my limited research location scope. I conducted this study within urban environments, and recommend future research in different or similar environments, locally and internationally. Enriching the study's findings through further research in different situations could enhance generalization and help other nonprofits find further strategies for maintaining organizational longevity and sustainability.
2. Recommendations for future research should consider further limitations of this study. The limitations of this study involved using a small sample size,

consisting of four nonprofit leaders. I conducted the study at four nonprofit organizations located in the State of Wisconsin, which restricted the generalizability of the study findings. Researchers conducting similar research studies in the future should consider increasing the sample size.

3. Performing similar research studies involving different types of business leaders, including for-profits, should enable prospective researchers to gather rich data related to strategies used to maintain financial sustainability during economic downturns.
4. I recommend future studies include the perspectives of employees, board members, and other related stakeholders or focus groups to enhance the findings' reliability. Future research studies should specifically incorporate personnel working under the guidance of business leaders to gain diverse insights regarding the strategies used to maintain financial sustainability, especially during economic crises.
5. Researching with a wide range of nonprofit leaders from different sectors or industries is highly likely to result in valuable insights through further studies. Understanding various key industries or sectors, such as arts, humanity, environment, and other social causes, will enhance future findings' reliability and validity.
6. Future research should involve using quantitative or mixed-methods research methodologies to examine the relationship between strategies for maintaining the financial sustainability of nonprofit organizations during economic

downturns and other variables, such as (a) fiscal oversights and operational fundings, (b) human resources, (c) operational capacities of program services, and (d) internal systems and infrastructure. Researchers conducting longitudinal studies in the future to examine these variables could provide business leaders with new statistical data that may help with the strategies used to maintain financial sustainability during economic downturns.

7. Lastly, I suggest further studies by neutral third-party researchers with volunteering nonprofit leaders willing to share information without reservations to create an enriched financial sustainability database to minimize potential biases and opaque limitations. Although the IRS's audit disclosure requirements were tightened after the Great Recession (2008-09) through the Sarbanes-Oxley Act (Saxton & Neely, 2019), and included some nonprofits, there are still limitations. For instance, some critical financial and strategic management information may be missing due to exemptions such as income-eligibility threshold, business type, or size.

### **Reflections**

My doctoral journey has been a once-in-a-lifetime experience that has challenged me personally, academically, and professionally to overcome various unpredictable barriers and obstacles. Personally, it was sometimes an emotionally, psychologically, financially exhausting, and lonely ride due to the losses of some close relationships through disconnects, passings, and time constraints. I used self-help and personal development resources, such as motivational success stories and the study's possible

social impact, to encourage myself during down times. Academically, my challenges included time management, study-life balance, literature research, reviews, synopses, and maintaining scholarly writings, to meet the high doctoral study's expectations.

Moreover, it was sometimes challenging to separate personal issues from the academic process to avoid interferences or negative influences on interpersonal relationships. For instance, to avoid personal biases from influencing my research, I practiced reflexivity by keeping a reflective journal before my interviews with participants. Furthermore, I learned to distance myself sometimes and see the academic process from a third party's viewpoint to remain as focused and objective as possible. The participants in this research study were cooperative, confident, and open to sharing their perspectives due to prior rapport and their sincere beliefs in the potential impact of the research findings.

Finally, through the doctoral process, I have developed or improved my professional skills, such as researching, interacting effectively with others, and writing for scholarly purposes. Additionally, the doctoral process has increased my confidence in participating in professional discussions on topics relating to nonprofits' sustainability strategies and public policies. Overall, the doctoral journey has been challenging; nonetheless, it also helped me develop the skills needed to impact positively as a future social change agent. I reaffirmed my long-held belief that life is full of many unpredictable obstacles, but with determination and perseverance, it is possible to overcome them.

## Conclusion

Most nonprofits heavily depend on external funding sources, including the government and philanthropic groups, and are vulnerable to financial instability and revenue decline during economic downturns (Piatak & Pettijohn, 2021b). Furthermore, some nonprofit leaders experience significant financial strain during economic downturns due to a lack of strategies to ensure long-term financial sustainability (Piatak & Pettijohn, 2021b). Based on Lin and Wang's (2016) study, Piatak & Pettijohn (2021b) noted that 40% of nonprofit leaders faced financial sustainability difficulties during the Great Recession (2008–2009).

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case research was to explore strategies that some nonprofit business leaders employ to maintain financial sustainability during economic downturns. The primary research question was, What strategies do some nonprofit business leaders use to maintain financial sustainability during economic downturns? I conducted semistructured interviews with four participants in Wisconsin through Zoom and reviewed organizational documents and artifacts to gather this study's data from various sources. Four key themes that emerged from the data analysis included (a) fiscal oversights and operational fundings, (b) human resources, (c) operational capacities of program services, and (d) internal systems and infrastructure.

This study's participants shared strategies nonprofit leaders can use to enhance the internal processes, infrastructure, administration, and management resources to ensure long-term financial sustainability. Furthermore, based on the research findings, nonprofit leaders should pay attention to key intermediary factors that impact management resource

capacity-building to maintain organizational sustainability. Some key factors nonprofit leaders should enhance for effective capacity-building include strategic planning, organizational culture and leadership, innovations, change management, communication, and strategic partnerships.

Furthermore, applying the financial strategies the nonprofit leaders effectively used in this study can improve other nonprofits' capability and sustainability to serve their community citizens. Additionally, nonprofit key stakeholders, including policy advocates, researchers, and policymakers may use this study's findings to shape the direction of nonprofits' sustainability capacity-building policies. Lastly, nonprofit scholars and practitioners may find the gaps and limitations in this study critical to further expand the knowledge base to enrich future financial sustainability strategies.

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## Appendix: Interview Protocol

Study: Exploring Strategies for Maintaining the Financial Sustainability of Nonprofit Organizations During Economic Downturns

*Time of interview:*

*Date:*

*Interviewer:*

*Interviewee:*

*Interviewee Position:*

Research Purpose: The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study is to explore strategies that some nonprofit business leaders use to maintain financial sustainability during economic downturns.

Research Question: What strategies do some nonprofit business leaders use to maintain financial sustainability during economic downturns?

### Pre-Interview Preparation and Background Review About Interviewee:

1. Interviewee's understanding of sustainability in the context of nonprofit survival and leadership during economic downturn.
2. Check background/credentials (educational and professional) for the nonprofit business management role.
3. Ascertain interviewee's insights in nonprofit sustainable financing models and preliminary consent/willingness to participate.
4. Send email invitations and telephone follow-ups.
5. Send interview protocol, consent form and interview questions to interested

participants.

6. The researcher should develop a trustworthy relationship with the participants and be candid about the study's goal. Establishing a working relationship with participants has an effect on their willingness to give information about the research study.
7. Interview Coding: Develop a list of codes for the interview transcript by compiling the words and key emphases my participants will use in answering the research question and describing their phenomena about the subject matter. The language and tone of the key phrases my participants stress upon will be the emerging codes, to begin building upon themes and categories for further analysis in the research process after the interview.
8. Use virtual meetings (Microsoft Team/Zoom) to interview participants.

Interview Questions:

1. What strategies do you use to maintain financial sustainability during economic downturns?
2. How did your employees respond to those strategies?
3. How did you identify these strategies to maintain financial sustainability during economic downturns?
4. How do you measure the effectiveness of each sustainability strategy?
5. What modifications did you apply to any strategy to improve its effectiveness in maintaining financial sustainability during economic downturns?
6. What key barriers did you encounter to the implementation of strategies to

maintain financial sustainability during economic downturns?

7. How did you overcome these key barriers?

Wrap Up Question: What additional information regarding strategies for maintaining financial sustainability during economic downturns would you like to share that we have not already discussed?

Conclusion: Thank participants for their contribution and patronage to the study.

In-text-Coding and Themes Analysis of Intact Interview Transcript: Analysis of in-text coding for the interview. This means selecting chunks of data and apply the codes to my interview full transcript to identify themes in the text.