

1-27-2026

Leadership Strategies Used by Entrepreneurial Ecosystem Resource Providers to Support Entrepreneurial Success

Sarah Niehaus
Walden University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.waldenu.edu/dissertations>

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Walden Dissertations and Doctoral Studies Collection at ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Walden Dissertations and Doctoral Studies by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact ScholarWorks@waldenu.edu.

Walden University

College of Management and Human Potential

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

Sarah G. Niehaus

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
and that any and all revisions required by
the review committee have been made.

Review Committee

Dr. Jorge Gaytan, Committee Chairperson, Doctor of Business Administration Faculty

Dr. Yvonne Doll, Committee Member, Doctor of Business Administration Faculty

Chief Academic Officer and Provost
Sue Subocz, Ph.D.

Walden University
2026

Abstract

Leadership Strategies Used by Entrepreneurial Ecosystem Resource Providers to Support

Entrepreneurial Success

by

Sarah G. Niehaus

MBA, Ottawa University, 2019

BS, Ottawa University, 2017

Research Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Business Administration

Walden University

March 2026

Abstract

Failure to collaborate effectively within entrepreneurial ecosystems remains a significant concern for leaders of entrepreneurial ecosystem organizations. Without clear, actionable collaboration strategies, these leaders may struggle to support entrepreneurial success and make informed decisions that enhance financial performance. Grounded in Mockler's complex adaptive systems theory, the purpose of this qualitative pragmatic inquiry was to identify and explore effective strategies some leaders within entrepreneurial ecosystem organizations use to collaborate in a manner that supports entrepreneurial success. Participants included seven leaders of entrepreneurial ecosystem organizations located in the Midwest United States with successful experiences using such strategies. Data were collected from semistructured interviews and publicly available documentation. Three themes emerged from thematic analysis: (a) entrepreneurial ecosystems need a champion, (b) certain leadership traits and styles are more effective in fostering a successful entrepreneurial ecosystem, and (c) entrepreneurial ecosystems play a vital role in community economic development strategies. A key recommendation for entrepreneurial ecosystem organization leaders is to improve relationship-building efforts by seeking certain leadership traits for ecosystem leadership. Potential implications for positive social change include strengthening entrepreneurial ecosystems through collaboration, enhancing startup success, and driving community economic growth. Increased economic activity can generate tax revenues that fund public improvements, social programs, and resources for future entrepreneurs, creating a sustainable cycle of development and empowerment.

Leadership Strategies Used by Entrepreneurial Ecosystem Resource Providers to Support
Entrepreneurial Success

by

Sarah G. Niehaus

MBA, Ottawa University, 2019

BS, Ottawa University, 2017

Research Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Business Administration

Walden University

March 2026

Dedication

This project is first and foremost dedicated to my parents, my father Terry and in loving memory of my mother Barb. Dad, thank you for always being the rock of our family. It is because of you that I learned valuable lessons in taking pride in the work I do. Mom, thank you for insisting I could do hard things “in spite of” you. I am the ambitious, persistent woman I am today because of you.

To my husband, Matthew, I also dedicate this project. Thank you for being my person, my rock, and my best friend through this journey. We met when I had just begun this academic journey, and you supported me through many ups and downs along the way. A simple thank you will never be enough. I love you, “all the manys.”

To my friends, family members, and professional connections that have supported me throughout this journey: thank you. Your faith in me throughout these years also kept me going when I felt I couldn't. Thank you, so very much.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank and acknowledge Dr. Jorge Gaytan, my chair/mentor throughout this project. Dr. Gaytan, your invaluable guidance throughout these years has been immensely appreciated, and I could not have done this without your timely feedback, deep analysis and critiques, and empathetic support along the way. I appreciate every moment you spent with my ideas as you helped me navigate them as well. Thank you for everything. Additionally, I wish to acknowledge and thank everyone at Walden University who played a role in this journey, from my student success advisors to my additional committee members.

Table of Contents

Section 1: Foundation of the Project.....	1
Background of the Problem	1
Business Problem Focus and Project Purpose	2
Research Question	4
Assumptions and Limitations	4
Assumptions.....	4
Limitations	5
Transition	5
Section 2: The Literature Review	7
A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature.....	7
Literature Review Organization.....	8
Application to the Applied Business Problem	9
Complex Adaptive Systems Theory	10
Other Supporting and Contrasting Theories	15
Entrepreneurial Ecosystem Evolution and Development	22
Leadership Strategies for Entrepreneurial Success and Support	28
Transition	33
Section 3: Research Project Methodology	35
Project Ethics	35
Nature of the Project	38
Population, Sampling, and Participants	39

Data Collection Activities.....	42
Interview Questions	45
Data Organization and Analysis Techniques	46
Reliability and Validity.....	51
Reliability.....	51
Validity	52
Transition and Summary.....	54
Section 4: Application of Professional Practice and Implications for Change	55
Presentation of the Findings.....	55
Theme 1	56
Theme 2	63
Theme 3	69
Applications to Professional Practice	74
Implications for Social Change.....	76
Recommendations for Action	77
Recommendations for Further Research.....	78
Reflections	79
Conclusion	80
References.....	82
Appendix A: Interview Protocol.....	97
Appendix B: Interview Questions.....	99

Section 1: Foundation of the Project

Background of the Problem

Leaders of entrepreneurial ecosystem organizations must collaborate with one another fully to meet the needs of entrepreneurs (Feld, 2020; Roundy et al., 2018). These leaders may have unique approaches and agendas to assisting entrepreneurs but must work together as entrepreneurs if they are to create and maintain successful businesses and potentially add to social-change contributions within their communities. The purpose of this qualitative pragmatic inquiry research project was to identify and explore the strategies that some leaders within entrepreneurial ecosystem organizations use to collaborate in a manner that supports entrepreneurial success.

Entrepreneurial ecosystem organizational leaders affect the success of entrepreneurs through their collaborative research strategies, or lack thereof, with one another. In 2022, there was a relative paucity of studies on entrepreneurial ecosystems and the effects leadership strategies within those ecosystems have on entrepreneurial success (Vedula & Kim, 2019). This project's findings have added to business contributions because, as Cao and Shi (2020) found, the benefit of entrepreneurial ecosystem organizational leaders working together in full collaboration may increase entrepreneurial startup success rates through a reduction in resource scarcity, filling structural gaps, and institutional voids.

Kauffman, the national organization dedicated to understanding entrepreneurship success, detailed a decline in overall startup success rates after one year in 2020 (Kauffman Indicators of Entrepreneurship, 2021). This project had the potential to add

social-change contributions to local communities because the collaboration of entrepreneurial ecosystem organizational leaders may lead to an increase in entrepreneurial confidence, raising startup success rates, and improving community economic development. Growth in economic development opportunities could mean increased tax revenues used to make community enhancements, such as improving parks, adding social programs, providing incentive programs for other entrepreneurs, and making mentorship available to other future entrepreneurs (“Invigorating entrepreneurial ecosystems”, 2020). The background to the problem has been provided, and the focus will now shift to the problem statement.

Business Problem Focus and Project Purpose

The specific business problem was that some Midwest United States leaders within entrepreneurial ecosystem organizations lacked strategies to collaborate in a manner that supports entrepreneurial success. Therefore, the purpose of the qualitative pragmatic inquiry project was to identify and explore strategies that some leaders within entrepreneurial ecosystem organizations used to collaborate in a manner that supported entrepreneurial success.

The target population consisted of seven Midwest United States leaders within entrepreneurial ecosystem organizations with successful experience in using strategies to collaborate in a manner that supported entrepreneurial success. Researchers use the purposive sampling method to select specific participants meeting the established participating criteria to obtain relevant information that would help researchers answer the central research question (Memon et al., 2024). I used purposive sampling to select

seven participants meeting the participant eligibility criteria established for this project. Participants become eligible to participate in a research project if they possess knowledge of, and experience in, the phenomenon the researchers are investigating (McGrath et al., 2019). For this project, participants had to be entrepreneurial ecosystem organizational leaders with at least 5 years of successful experience in collaborating in a manner that supported entrepreneurial success.

Gaining access to organizations and participants for a research project can be a difficult task (Sullivan et al., 2021). DePoy and Gitlin (2019) proposed that researchers consider gathering a list of business organizations from a local chamber of commerce, working with the main staff in these organizations, using more recruitment tools, and possessing a better understanding of the target population to successfully perform the task of gaining access to organizations and participants. To gain access to participants, I communicated with local chambers of commerce as well as professional connections in the entrepreneurial ecosystem field to obtain recommendations for participants. I then worked with the main staff of these organizations to gain access to participants. In terms of sources of data collection used in this project, I conducted semistructured interviews and reviewed documentation and artifacts.

The conceptual framework that grounded this project was Roundy et al.'s (2018) complex adaptive systems theory. The logical connections between the framework presented and the nature of this project included the knowledge of agents in a defined region or area with unique agendas and approaches to entrepreneurship, all working together under one identity, an entrepreneurial ecosystem. These agents presented an

opportunity for increased collaboration, but with unique leaders, organizational missions, and ideas on success metrics, it may be challenging for numerous agencies to move in the same direction towards a goal. Therefore, the complex adaptive systems theory was a logical grounding theory to identify and explore strategies that some leaders within entrepreneurial ecosystem organizations used to collaborate in a manner that supported entrepreneurial success.

Research Question

What strategies do leaders within entrepreneurial ecosystem organizations use to collaborate in a manner that supports entrepreneurial success?

Assumptions and Limitations

Assumptions

Assumptions are facts considered to be true but cannot be verified by the researcher (Walden University Doctoral Capstone Resources, n.d.). I assumed that the data collected during the interviews would accurately reflect the participants' experiences. I assumed that the use of the concept of entrepreneurial ecosystem organizations was universal across all industries, cultures, and organizations. I also assumed that the data collected from participants would help answer the following overarching research question: What strategies do leaders within entrepreneurial ecosystem organizations use to collaborate in a manner that supports entrepreneurial success? Finally, I assumed that leaders within entrepreneurial ecosystem organizations would be willing to participate in this project and that related documents for review would be accessible.

Limitations

Limitations are potential study weaknesses that cannot be addressed by the researcher (Walden University Doctoral Capstone Resources, n.d.). For example, a limitation of this project was that only a few leaders within entrepreneurial ecosystem organizations participated in this project. An entrepreneurial ecosystem is comprised of a flexible number of organizations, and it would not be possible to interview every level of leadership at each entrepreneurial ecosystem organization to attain project results. Conducting a project with only a few leaders from a few different organizations could prevent the application of findings across the industry. In addition, some leaders within entrepreneurial ecosystem organizations could have chosen not to participate in this project. It was possible that any one or more entrepreneurial ecosystem organizations may have had changes from within that impacted its role in the larger ecosystem. These unknown factors could have then impacted earlier findings of the semistructured interviews.

Transition

In Section 1, the problem's background, problem statement, purpose statement, research question, and conceptual framework on which this project was grounded were presented. Section 2 includes a comprehensive literature review of the problem. Section 3 details the role of the researcher in the data collection process, and participants' description, as well as the research method and design, data collection, and organization techniques, data analysis, and reliability and validity. In Section 4, the purpose statement will be restated, followed by the presentation of the research findings. Section 4 also

includes applications to professional practice, the implications for positive social change, recommendations, reflections on the DBA experience, suggested directions for future research, and a conclusion.

Section 2: The Literature Review

A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

I reviewed literature on entrepreneurial ecosystem leadership strategies published in various journals and seminal scholarly books. Google Scholar, linked to the Walden University Library's website, served as the primary source for accessing journal articles. The Walden University Library allows students access to various databases. Databases used to obtain literature for this project included ABI/INFORM Complete, Academic Search Complete, Business Source Complete, Emerald Management, ProQuest Central, and Sage Premier. Furthermore, I also accessed various open journals to obtain literature related to entrepreneurial ecosystem leadership strategies. AOSIS OpenJournals provided open access to peer-reviewed scholarly journals from various academic disciplines. Similarly, ScienceDirect provided both tolled and open access to a full-text scientific database containing journal articles and book chapters. In some instances, I accessed government websites to obtain information about entrepreneurial ecosystem leadership strategies.

The strategy for searching through existing literature entailed the use of keywords and phrases in the various databases listed above. I applied filters to database searches to narrow down the search results. These filters included specific keywords, a specified period, and specific databases. When using Google Scholar, I gave preference to articles published in or after 2021, ensuring the literature was topical and relevant. Secondly, I gave preference to articles that were available in the Walden University Library. The keywords and phrases I used in my search were *entrepreneurship*, *entrepreneurial*

development, entrepreneurial ecosystems, complex adaptive systems, leadership strategies, change management, economic development, workforce development, systems, multiple case studies, case studies, qualitative studies, regional entrepreneurship, and social entrepreneurship. I used Ulrich's Periodicals Directory to verify that literature was peer-reviewed. The 100 references that this project contains include 83 scholarly peer-reviewed articles representing 83% of the total, four nonpeer-reviewed articles representing 4%, one government website representing 1%, and 12 books representing 12%. The total number of references in this project published within the 2021–2025 period is 74, which is 74% of the total number. The literature review contains 52 references, with 41 references published within the 2021–2025 period, representing 79%, and 40 from scholarly peer-reviewed sources, representing 77%.

Literature Review Organization

In the next section, I focus on the application of the literature to the research question and include a brief description of the purpose of this project. The themes I discussed in this literature review are frameworks for collaboration, entrepreneurial ecosystem development and evolution, and leadership strategies for entrepreneurial support. Throughout the literature review, I compare and contrast different points of view and relationships between previous research and findings with this project.

The first theme, frameworks for collaboration, includes a critical analysis and synthesis of the conceptual framework I selected for this project, which is the complex adaptive systems theory. I discuss the reasons the complex adaptive systems theory is suitable for explaining entrepreneurial ecosystem organization and leadership structures

by using supporting and contrasting theories from relevant literature on the topic of entrepreneurial ecosystems and leadership strategies. Some of these supporting and contrasting theories are agency theory, agent-network theory, and stakeholder theory.

The second theme, entrepreneurial ecosystem evolution and development, starts with a brief overview of the development of entrepreneurial ecosystem leadership strategies over time. I discuss common concerns relating to the construct as well as the various definitions, antecedents, and consequences of implementing or lacking entrepreneurial ecosystem leadership strategies. The third and final theme for discussion is leadership strategies for entrepreneurial success and support. The theme starts with a general discussion about leadership and leadership styles as it relates to entrepreneurial ecosystem leadership strategies. Leadership styles reviewed include adaptive leadership, servant leadership, and sustainable leadership.

Application to the Applied Business Problem

The purpose of this qualitative pragmatic inquiry research project was to identify and explore the strategies that some leaders within entrepreneurial ecosystem organizations used to collaborate in a manner that supports entrepreneurial success. Developing an understanding of such strategies required a qualitative approach using a pragmatic inquiry research design. The findings from this project provide insights into entrepreneurial ecosystem leadership strategies from a group of leaders' perspectives.

The findings of this project may assist with the development of appropriate strategies for collaborative leadership within entrepreneurial ecosystems and individual organizations. Once an understanding of the underlying meaning emerge, appropriate

strategies might equip leaders with the skills to improve entrepreneurial ecosystem leadership strategies. The findings from this project might improve business practices by identifying and exploring appropriate leadership strategies, leading to increased productivity and organizational competitiveness. The potential for social change rests in the understanding and development of recommendations to improve entrepreneurial ecosystem collaborative leadership strategies.

Complex Adaptive Systems Theory

The complex adaptive systems theory was used for detailing intricacies of entrepreneurial ecosystem organizational structure, leadership strategies used by agents of organizations within ecosystems, and effects these structures and strategies have on entrepreneurial success. Characteristics of complex adaptive systems that align with entrepreneurial ecosystems are self-organization, open-but-distinct boundaries, complex components, nonlinearity, adaptability, and sensitivity to initial conditions (Fuentes et al., 2024; Roundy et al., 2018). Ongoing research of entrepreneurial ecosystems does not include an agreed upon conceptual framework for researchers to base findings upon (Fuentes et al., 2024; Roundy et al., 2018), leaving scholars in a unique position to scrutinize ecosystem operations against a variety of additional factors using numerous framework options. Through further analysis of the individual components of complex adaptive systems, a meaningful connection was made between a complex adaptive systems framework, entrepreneurial ecosystems, and agent leadership strategies.

Self-organization is the first characteristic of the complex adaptive systems framework. Self-organizing strategies include using a simple set of rules for the larger

system to follow, allowing for greater adaptation to changing conditions and uncertainties (Coetzee, 2021). The agents of organizations in complex adaptive systems are the semi-autonomous building blocks of the system with unique and diverse thoughts and views of their surrounding environment (Schlaile et al., 2021). The organizational leaders of agencies involved in entrepreneurial ecosystems, bringing their own understanding of the problems, must solve and act on behalf of their own organizations as well as for the betterment of the system. Due to these collaborative actions of organizational leaders, self-organization of the ecosystem is achieved while still engaging in the leader's own organizational processes. Further understanding of the self-organization relationship to complex adaptive systems is explained through the second component of the framework, which is the open-but-distinct boundaries.

Open-but-distinct boundaries are the second characteristic of the complex adaptive systems framework. Riaz et al. (2024) detailed complex adaptive systems as a balance between function and hierarchy, and those within a complex system may define boundaries differently, including focusing directly on the individuals and organizations involved, geographic boundaries, industries being served, project-based circumstances, or other options. Entrepreneurial ecosystems have boundaries that may not always be easily defined (Tabas et al., 2023), but organizational leaders make informed choices based on the factors listed and other issues to determine those boundaries and make them the most effective. Organizational leaders of complex adaptive systems make these decisions by considering even more complex components of the system.

Complex components are the generalized third characteristic of the complex adaptive systems framework. The components of entrepreneurial ecosystems mirror the properties of other complex adaptive systems, and these complex components inform the decision-making and adaptation measures of these systems (Roundy et al., 2018). The complex components involved in complex adaptive systems include not only the six grounding elements, but also every individual, organization, and project involved within the interconnected system, as well as the processes and structures in place for each of those individual elements, and the way they operate and adapt individually and within the larger system (Rapuano & Valickas, 2023). The number of complex components related to entrepreneurial ecosystems is difficult to quantify easily given these intricacies and can be equally difficult to manage. An additional component to complex adaptive systems is the management of these complex components.

Nonlinearity is the fourth characteristic of the complex adaptive systems framework. The interdependent complex components of entrepreneurial ecosystems lead to feedback loops or opportunities for activities to feed back onto themselves either directly or through further interventions (Roundy et al., 2018). Kazakov et al. (2021) underscored the importance of managing such interdependent and complex adaptive systems over attempts to simplify the structures. Roundy et al. (2018) noted some entrepreneurial ecosystem organizational leaders may wish to simplify these structures because feedback loops may have positive implications, such as emergence of new entrepreneurial activity, or negative implications, such as increasing a community's need for housing due to increases in entrepreneurship, workforce, and other factors. However,

the fifth component of complex adaptive systems, adaptability, defines the reasons to remain flexible with the system's various complex components.

Adaptability is the fifth characteristic of the complex adaptive systems framework and is flexible for use in a variety of situations. Abdalla and Nakagawa (2022) described adaptability as a key for any organization to become more innovative and sustainable. Lower-level individuals working within entrepreneurial ecosystem organizations are likely to be influential in making higher-level system changes (Roundy et al., 2018), as these individuals are working with the entrepreneurs most readily and watching the evolution of needs. Roundy et al. (2018) contended that entrepreneurial ecosystem organizational leaders must continuously modify the systems in place to respond to external and internal changes. To understand the areas that may require change in such a system, though, it is also necessary to understand the initial grounding situations that prompted the change. This understanding, otherwise known as sensitivity to initial conditions, is the final component of complex adaptive systems.

Sensitivity to initial conditions is the sixth characteristic of the complex adaptive systems framework. Initial conditions are the internal models and structures of systems that may be changed to cope with new situations (Shi et al., 2021). As noted by Roundy et al. (2018), even small changes to the initial configuration of an entrepreneurial ecosystem may have significant consequences later. The structures that started a complex adaptive system may require refinement over time, as the overall focus of the organizations involved changes, technological advances, personnel changes prompt larger system adjustments to accommodate workload, and countless other factors. Ultimately,

the complex adaptive system must continue to provide services or otherwise determine how to operate, even during times of structural changes that may change the initial conditions of the system. These outputs must also continue to connect with the larger goals of the system.

Methods for controlling the outputs of organizations within complex adaptive systems are necessary to ensure the structures and practices of the system always remain connected to the larger organizational goals. However, disconnection to larger performance goals is possible as complex systems are dependent upon and often constrained by the exchanges with other organizations (Yang & Zhang, 2022). These structures, sometimes termed complex adaptive organizations, are characterized by emergent patterns, adaptation, complex social networks, and agency in taking effective action (Lizier & Reich, 2021). Lizier and Reich (2021) uncovered disconnection between these organizations when adaptive professionals work within organizational systems and practices that are still largely based in formality and structure. Complex adaptive systems must embrace all elements of the complexity process or risk disengagement by the professionals advancing the system's goals and practices (Lizier & Reich, 2021). Lessons on the importance of reviewing and aligning the structures and procedures of complex systems can be learned from several unique industries.

Complex adaptive systems theory is a conceptual framework used in research studies across numerous industries. Burger et al. (2021) conducted community-based complex adaptive systems research during times of natural disasters and other crises. Complex systems at the community level require a higher level of collaboration amongst

the agents involved as there are three existing complex systems in individual, societal, and physical structures (Burger et al., 2021). Mockler (1968) suggested a systematic approach ensuring these systems align using clearly defined responsibility and delegation techniques to distinguish the relationships across all departments, divisions, and subdivisions. Community-level complex systems require a higher level of collaboration amongst the agents involved, including environmental research. In the next section, the complex adaptive systems framework is used and analyzed as part of industries other than entrepreneurship.

The complex adaptive systems framework is a complicated framework for scholars to comprehend. Akinboade et al. (2023) studied the components of complex adaptive systems and recognized the steps within the framework are individually complicated to explain. These complexities exist as the components of the complex adaptive systems framework can occur nonlinearly, be either dependent or independent of other system components, and assessed using metrics for success that vary between the numerous sets of relationships within the system (Akinboade et al., 2023). Although these complexities add challenges for researchers using this framework, the nature of entrepreneurial ecosystem operations and entrepreneurial development is best suited to using the complex adaptive systems conceptual framework over other existing frameworks.

Other Supporting and Contrasting Theories

The complex adaptive systems theory was suitable for this project because of the many complicated factors surrounding strategies leaders of entrepreneurial ecosystem

organizations used to support entrepreneurial success. I conducted further research on alternative theories that could be suitable and not suitable for the project. In the following sections, I present an analysis of these alternatives, which includes agency theory, actor-network theory, and stakeholder theory.

Agency Theory

Agency theory is a contrasting, relationship-based alternative conceptual framework for understanding entrepreneurial ecosystems and their organizational leadership strategies. Agency theory is defined by the simple key assumption that individuals are motivated to act in their own self-interest and will maximize personal benefit for themselves or their organization (McMullen et al., 2021). Due to this self-interest component of agency theory, this is not a suitable conceptual framework for evaluating entrepreneurial ecosystems that require interconnectedness and collaboration. There has been research in which agency theory has been used and proven suitable for the entrepreneurial setting.

There exist instances where self-interested behaviors are beneficial, and agency theory is the proper conceptual framework for researching those situations. Solomon et al. (2021) conducted research across 19 countries to identify and understand the differences in national policies that may affect entrepreneurial risk, finding a weak connection between national policies and entrepreneurial activity. Agency theory was chosen as the lens for this project as entrepreneurialism is rooted in providing for oneself and family (Solomon et al., 2021), which can be described as self-invested behavior.

Although agency theory did not show a stronger connection in this project, others have attempted to use the theory in other conceptual modeling research.

Maintaining individualized control over system activities, while ensuring other agencies are involved for increased oversight, ensures research joint ventures can operate smoothly and reduce technical complexities. Alternatively, entrepreneurial ecosystems use complex systems wherein many actors have blended levels of control and influence (Roundy, 2021), which may at times cause organizational confusion and relationship tensions. While these occurrences may be viewed by some as a negative, entrepreneurial ecosystem resource providers support entrepreneurs across all experience levels and rely on the variety of capabilities and influences of individual actors and organizations. An entrepreneurial ecosystem is unable to use a theory where decision-making control and power is in the hands of only a few organizations given the necessity for all organizations to bring their own experiences and resources to the greater whole. Other theories exist that align with the needs of entrepreneurial ecosystems, including actor-network theory.

Actor-Network Theory

Actor-network theory is a supporting alternative conceptual framework for understanding entrepreneurial ecosystems and their organizational leadership strategies. Network theory is the process of assembling like-minded individuals or organizations where a connection exists in working towards a specific result or goal (Eid & Akella, 2024). Actor-network theory is a more specific network theory wherein an individual, such as an entrepreneur, is unable to be successful without a network of interconnected elements (Ahmadi & Soga, 2022), such as the heterogenous relationships between

entrepreneurial ecosystem resource providers. The actor-network theory suits the description of entrepreneurial ecosystems and the resource providers of such a system as these entities work together towards the same goal of entrepreneurial success using their own unique perspectives, resources, and capabilities.

An entrepreneurial idea successfully coming to fruition due to the alliances and relationships created within a networked system of like-minded organizations and individuals is an example of actor-network theory in action. Networks are required for entrepreneurial success, as they not only include the resource providers assisting the entrepreneur, such as entrepreneurial ecosystem resource providers, but also the interpersonal relationships between customers, suppliers, competitors, and other collaborators in the industry (Iqbal et al., 2022). An entrepreneurial ecosystem may have its performance evaluated based upon the relationships of those within the network and the effectiveness of those relationships in the venture's success (Xu et al., 2023). A network of support organizations, individuals, and other supportive institutions can make a difference in whether an entrepreneur is able to successfully initiate or continue a startup venture.

Entrepreneurs may not successfully initiate or continue a successful startup without a support system, and it is the duty of entrepreneurial ecosystem resource providers to lessen the burdens of entrepreneurial initiatives. Actor-networks of service and resource providers, such as entrepreneurial ecosystem agents, are essential to the startup creation and survival process because these networks include not only the agents and organizations, but also the nonhuman tools and programs available to an entrepreneur

to guide in their startup journey (Xu et al., 2023). These tools may include financial, talent, and knowledge resources as well as business planning templates and models (Schaft & Füller, 2023). Although these human and nonhuman resources do support entrepreneurial success, it is still possible for a venture to not start due to entrepreneurial fear and other barriers.

An entrepreneurial venture could stall at the conceptualization phase due to the internal and external barriers faced by an aspiring entrepreneur. These barriers cause significant negative effects on entrepreneurial behavior and may include cognitive distortions related to self-efficacy, motivation, and interest in the idea; social capital concerns related to biases, community support, and other stereotypes; and financial and startup experience barriers (Ahmadi & Soga, 2022). The fear of failure that may increase because of these barriers is a real and significant concern for some aspiring entrepreneurs. Without a network-based approach to entrepreneurial support, some aspiring entrepreneurs may never see their idea come to fruition. Other theories exist that align with the needs of entrepreneurs seeking information to support their entrepreneurial ventures, including stakeholder theory.

Stakeholder Theory

Stakeholder theory is a supporting alternative conceptual framework for understanding entrepreneurial ecosystems and their organizational leadership strategies. Stakeholder theory is an analysis of the relationships and outcomes between stakeholders and end users or clients (Ramoglou et al., 2023). Stakeholder theory helps define and understand the relationship between entrepreneurial ecosystem resource providers, such

as stakeholders and entrepreneurs, end users or clients (Bosse et al., 2023). In addition, researchers use stakeholder theory to define and understand the relationship between entrepreneurs, as stakeholders, and customers, as the end user or client (Bosse et al., 2023). Researchers also use stakeholder theory to define and understand other configurations that allow entrepreneurial ecosystem resource providers and entrepreneurs to interact with one another and each other in a variety of stakeholder relationship settings (Ramoglou et al., 2023). Stakeholder theory can also provide researchers with a lens for evaluating the value created through entrepreneurial initiatives.

Multiple perspectives exist within stakeholder theory, including a theory-based, stakeholder-value-creation framework. Freudenreich et al. (2020) developed the framework to analyze the parties involved in business relationships and found value exchanges to and from parties in a complex network of relationship building based on numerous factors. These factors include the entrepreneur's relationship to financial and societal stakeholder, employees, business partners, and customers as well as the interaction of those individuals with activities related to how goods and services are provided (Ali & Cottle, 2021). All these relationships are valuable to an entrepreneur and can provide insights into the sayings, doings, and actions of successful entrepreneurial ventures (Pankov et al., 2021). An entrepreneur must consider the proper way to use the information received from others when making decisions for the sustainability and survival of their business. The relationship between stakeholders and customers may prompt change strategies that an entrepreneur may wish to implement or must learn to

overlook if the suggested changes are not in keeping with their definition of entrepreneurial success.

Stakeholder engagement in entrepreneurial endeavors is crucial. Fischer et al. (2020) conducted research on entrepreneurs seeking recommendations on business sustainability measures after receiving such input from their stakeholders. A process for balancing the recommended measures was created to assist the entrepreneurs in rejecting, altering, or adopting stakeholder wishes. Fischer et al. (2020) indicated that the decision of whether a recommendation is implemented comes down to the relationship between the entrepreneur and stakeholder. While an entrepreneur must make their own decisions, an entrepreneurial ecosystem is comprised of individuals and organizations that are part of the necessary relationship building needs of the entrepreneur for their various stages of success (Roundy, 2021). A strong relationship between stakeholders and entrepreneurs, therefore, is crucial for success of the entrepreneurial endeavor.

Relationship building is a key component to entrepreneurial success. Intentionally cultivating relationships can create stronger trust and loyalty between parties (Marschlich & Ingenhoff, 2021). An entrepreneur must stay motivated to maximize, balance, and optimize the relationships they must balance to meet the requirements needed for a sustainable, successful venture (Dabić et al., 2021). Relationships with a stakeholder involved within an entrepreneurial ecosystem is an ideal starting place for an entrepreneur. An entrepreneurial ecosystem provides a unique opportunity to continually enhance and grow the relationships an entrepreneur may have with the many stakeholders the venture will have in the present and future.

Entrepreneurial Ecosystem Evolution and Development

Entrepreneurial ecosystems, as a concept to describe access and dissemination of related resources and services, are relatively newer research. Definitions to describe entrepreneurial ecosystems stem from research compiled on entrepreneurial innovation from the 1990s, drawing comparisons from ecological ecosystems where elements in nature depend on one another to survive and thrive (Moore, 1993). Despite the concept of entrepreneurial ecosystems being newer, terminology has rapidly eclipsed usage of any other similar language to describe entrepreneurial successes and innovations (Donaldson, 2021). Although *entrepreneurial ecosystems* have seemingly been adopted as the terminology of choice among practitioners, there continues to be chaos in the evolution and development of such systems as well as how individuals and organizations within such a network should operate and coexist.

Chaotic Evolution

To understand the chaotic evolution of an entrepreneurial ecosystem, it is crucial to understand its definition. An entrepreneurial ecosystem is a collective network of individuals, organizations, and institutions working together to create opportunities for small businesses and entrepreneurs for a community and its citizens (Roundy, 2021). The entrepreneurial ecosystem is not its own organization but is comprised of existing geographically and culturally similar individuals and organizations providing support services and resources through entrepreneur-centric interactions (Donaldson, 2021). Given the complexity of multiple individuals and organizations working towards similar goals, researchers have attempted to conceptualize a framework to understand the

complex operations of an entrepreneurial ecosystem and the differences between successful and unsuccessful ecosystems.

Entrepreneurial ecosystems are complex adaptive systems. They are composed of the complex and chaotic elements of the complex adaptive systems conceptual framework, which are self-organization, open-but-distinct boundaries, complex components, nonlinearity, adaptability, and sensitivity to initial conditions (Fuentes et al., 2024; Roundy et al., 2018). An entrepreneurial ecosystem is truly complex because of these elements, making it difficult for scholars to predict future behaviors and successes of an entrepreneurial ecosystem. Although an entrepreneurial ecosystem may take time to achieve notable success, frameworks have been implemented to attempt to make the task easier for ecosystem practitioners.

Entrepreneurial ecosystems are complicated resource networks that face numerous obstacles towards achieving sustained success. However, the importance of success within such ecosystems is high, given the positive perceptions entrepreneurs gain of the individuals and organizations of a successful entrepreneurial ecosystem (Cavallo et al., 2021). The individuals and organizations of an entrepreneurial ecosystem simultaneously cooperate and compete with one another to help entrepreneurs (Fuentes et al., 2024). The complexity of entrepreneurial ecosystems and their actors have prompted researchers to determine a framework for success. While no framework has been officially adopted by practitioners, there are examples of frameworks that include the many complex components of entrepreneurial ecosystems and attempts to coordinate them into a conceptual framework.

The first attempt at creating a conceptual framework for entrepreneurial ecosystems was developed by Lichtenstein and Lyons (2001). Lichtenstein and Lyons presented a conceptual framework for the entrepreneurial and economic development industries in the form of an entrepreneurial development system (EDS). The EDS concept is the first publicized version of an entrepreneurial ecosystem and the original structure for like-minded organizations working together towards helping entrepreneurs achieve their goals (Lichtenstein & Lyons, 2001). Lichtenstein and Lyons noted the EDS only works if it is grounded in the needs of the entrepreneur, not solely based on the needs of the agents of the system. A successful entrepreneurial ecosystem must take inventory of various support functions to ensure it has what it needs to successfully support entrepreneurial activities.

The development of the EDS concept is more than a conceptual framework to describe entrepreneurial ecosystems. The EDS is a system designed to develop entrepreneurs and generate businesses for community success (Lichtenstein & Lyons, 2001). Through noticing the amount of support necessary across technical, managerial, entrepreneurial, and maturity levels in the early stages of entrepreneurship, Lichtenstein and Lyons (2001) noted six unique functions, or types of support systems, needed to support the early-stage entrepreneur. These functions include recruiters/scouters, assessors, mentors/coaches, team managers, community connectors, and a general manager overseeing all components of the assistance process (Lichtenstein & Lyons, 2001). Notably, adequate human capital is a critical need to ensure the functioning of a successful entrepreneurial ecosystem (Tabas et al., 2023). Given the complexities already

noted of entrepreneurial ecosystems, though, human capital is merely one aspect of a successful ecosystem. The development of a successful entrepreneurial ecosystem relies on the human capital of the system also successfully supporting other common elements.

Development

How an entrepreneurial ecosystem comes to fruition is nonlinear and complex. The development of an entrepreneurial ecosystem is accelerated by the successes of entrepreneurs, as they provide positive feedback loop as founders, employees, and investors into other projects (Feld & Hathaway, 2020). Feld (2020) uncovered numerous ecosystems throughout the nation that have been gaining momentum and assisting more entrepreneurs in their ventures due to the support and recognition received. These successful ecosystems have provided further guidance to practitioners beyond the EDS framework to successfully support entrepreneurial success.

There are many factors that must be present within an entrepreneurial ecosystem to support entrepreneurial success. As noted by Roundy and Burke-Smalley (2022), human capital elements must exist to successfully support the ecosystem's functioning. Technical and material elements of a successful ecosystem must also exist. Internet, innovation capacity, and government size have large effects on the successful development of an entrepreneurial ecosystem, as well as market potential (Xie et al., 2021). Feld and Hathaway (2020) categorized the various capital needs of entrepreneurial ecosystems in a framework called the *seven capitals*, which include human, intellectual, cultural, financial, institutional, network, and physical capital. Given the complexity and volume of capital needed to develop and sustain an entrepreneurial ecosystem, research

exists on unsuccessful ecosystem initiatives and provides opportunity to understand what went wrong.

An entrepreneurial ecosystem may lose momentum and success over time for a variety of reasons. In some cases, the ecosystem is continuing to be successful but appears to be declining in terms of output because previously new startups are now established (Xu et al., 2023) and no longer need the same support from the ecosystem. In other cases, the ecosystem functions differently than it previously had because of human capital changes within organizations where it is possible that incoming resource providers may restart the task of understanding the way small businesses find support and resources (Roundy, 2021). Those previous parts of the ecosystem and earlier resource providers did not disappear. Instead, those individuals funneled energies into other projects beyond the ecosystem development and maintenance, remaining relevant in the community but not as members of an entrepreneurial ecosystem (Roundy, 2021). Without an established entrepreneurial ecosystem, the activities and support of such an ecosystem can still exist within a community, but in a less coordinated manner and without the geographic density seen in successful entrepreneurial ecosystems.

Leadership Within the Ecosystem

Describing leadership structures of entrepreneurial ecosystems is as complex as their evolution and development. Leaders must adopt a balanced strategy wherein self-organization of the network's actors are balanced with active coordination (Yang & Zhang, 2022). Entrepreneurial ecosystem leaders can coordinate the complex components of the ecosystem's participants and tools through behavioral integration by collaborating

and coordinating cognitive, social, and cultural characteristics of the resource providers (Yang & Zhang, 2022). Presently, there is no widely accepted or definitive framework or model available to assist ecosystem leaders in the development and implementation of leadership structures beyond the complex adaptive systems framework used by some practitioners in the field.

Possible leadership structures of an entrepreneurial ecosystem may be determined using principles from complex adaptive systems theory. Leaders of complex systems should focus on relationship building and creating the conditions for adaptability rather than focusing on control or predictability of the system (Lin & Yi, 2023). Lin and Yi (2023) suggested that adaptive strategies working together may include layers of management structures that provide efficiencies and organizational adaptability in these complexly linked systems. Any leadership approach to entrepreneurial ecosystems must include opportunities for all members of the system to have a voice in the process.

For researchers to suggest a potential leadership structure for entrepreneurial ecosystems, many leadership theories have been studied and components from these different theories leveraged in different ways. Roundy (2021) hypothesized that hybrid organizations play a critical role in developing entrepreneurial ecosystem successes. These organizations serve entrepreneurs and others in the industry through combined resources and structures where multiple services are bundled cohesively under one organization. Silvestri and Veltri (2020) combined research on corporate social responsibility, general leadership, and social entrepreneurship to provide a potential conceptual framework for sustainable leadership practices. Silvestri and Veltri's work led

to the development of a conceptual framework where leadership provides its values and beliefs and, through integrating the contextual elements of numerous leadership theories, an approach to corporate social responsibility created and implemented into a sustainable business model. These and other models allow for consideration on the amount of impact a leader's decision has on an organization or system, as well as the various leadership styles and plans that operate alongside this model, such as the organizational business model, social entrepreneurship theory, and others.

Leadership Strategies for Entrepreneurial Success and Support

For entrepreneurial ecosystems to successfully support entrepreneurial activity, some form of leadership must be in place. Leadership is itself a complicated practice where individuals can influence others to achieve a common goal (Roundy & Evans, 2024). The common goal of an entrepreneurial ecosystem is to encourage and sustain entrepreneurial activity in specific geographic areas through organization, development, and promotion of the ecosystem (Clark et al., 2021). As previously noted, there are no specific frameworks ecosystem leaders must use to be a successful ecosystem, but researchers have developed studies and research to uncover possible consistent themes in ecosystem leadership strategies.

Adaptive Leadership

While practitioners continue to refine the potential frameworks that can establish entrepreneurial ecosystems as successful systems for entrepreneurial success, leadership strategies must be intact in a manner that allows continued guidance towards the common goal of the parties involved. Adaptive leadership is a behavioral leadership practice

where adaptive leaders serve others and assist them to support their abilities to mobilize, motivate, organize, orient, and focus on challenges (Northouse, 2021). Adaptive leaders provide the support and perspectives to explore answers to problems with an ability to act swiftly when the needs of the system change (Lin & Yi, 2023). Adaptation is a leadership strategy that is important, but some leaders continue to struggle with the creation of a culture for adaptation.

Leaders must develop strategies to adapt to the situations around them, even when the leaders may have difficulty adapting their leadership styles. Leaders must learn to embrace discomfort and identify new solutions to challenges through adaptive leadership strategies, including regulating stressful situations, maintaining disciplined attention to the matter, and protecting the voices of those lower in the leadership hierarchy (Northouse, 2021). It is important in organizations that not only do the leaders have a voice in the strategies used to adapt to new situations, but also the employees of the organization are heard.

Adaptive leadership requires strategic changes to not only the way in which work is accomplished within an organization or system, but also the way individuals work with one another. Adaptive leadership includes leadership of self, organization, community, and society (Northouse, 2021). Tuazon et al. (2021) interviewed leaders and employees of organizations within multi-level systems to understand existing leadership practices. Through these interviews, three overarching themes were uncovered, including identifying the conditions for organizational perspective-taking, modifying organizational frames of reference, and introducing multi-level influence (Tuazon et al., 2021). While

these themes all include additional context, the emergence of multi-level influence showcases the complexity of multi-level organizations and how leaders must adapt over time, resulting in a need for more flexibility to the organizations or system's operational strategies. As entrepreneurial ecosystems are complex in their evolution, development, and maintenance, innovative strategies to adaptive ecosystem leadership are pertinent topics for research.

Adaptation is a kind of innovation that entrepreneurs leverage when finding solutions to problems. Drucker (1985) found that successful entrepreneurship comes from innovation, or the autonomous, ad hoc initiative to find success by whatever means. Innovation is adaptation at work because adaptation is the ability for leaders to change to become more fit with the environment around them as well as to have a willingness to modify and change existing procedures (Lin & Yi, 2023). Innovation is not the same as planning; instead, innovation is complementary and just as necessary for success. In addition to adaptive leadership strategies, other leadership strategies, such as servant leadership, may be used by organizations, individuals, or systems.

Servant Leadership

Servant leadership is a type of leadership strategy that originated from Greenleaf (1970). Greenleaf studied the work of numerous researchers, authors, and philosophers to define a leadership style where serving others is the primary focus. Servant leadership is defined as serving others first, or the natural feeling that one wants to serve (Greenleaf, 1970). This holistic style of leadership focuses on the behavior of the leader (Northouse, 2021). A stark contrast of leadership styles exists between the servant-first model and the

leader-first model, as the leader-first model demands power and responsibility before serving others, whereas servant-first leadership serves others first before the leader and their needs.

Since this leadership strategy is not as mature as other strategies, researchers have sought to understand the proper definition of servant leadership and the characteristics that must be in place to exercise it. Hai and Van (2021) conducted a review of leadership styles, most significantly servant leadership, and discovered that servant leadership is a type of leadership strategy that must be done by the individual leader. Seven characteristics exist in servant leadership, including encouraging emotional healing, creating value for the group, communicating conceptual skills, empowering followers, helping followers grow and succeed, putting followers first, and behaving ethically (Northouse, 2021). Servant leadership strategies can be utilized by any individual as part of their leadership journey. Although servant leadership can be implemented by any leader, its implementation in organizations is not easy.

Servant leadership cannot simply be implemented in organizations through procedures or other processes, and implementation is not an overnight process. Servant leadership requires a leader to go beyond their own self-interest and model servant leader behaviors to help their followers grow (Lan et al., 2021). A servant leader must make conscious efforts to put others before themselves, following the seven characteristics of servant leadership (Northouse, 2021). An organization cannot become a servant-leader organization on its own but must have individuals exhibiting the characteristics and traits of a servant leader in everything they do for themselves, their fellow employees, and their

organization. This way of thinking about leadership can be infused into other leadership strategies, such as sustainability leadership.

Sustainability Leadership

Sustainable leadership is another leadership strategy that may be used by leaders to ensure long-term success of their organizations. Sustainable leaders are those making a difference by being aware of the world around them and adopting new ways within their organizations of seeing, thinking, and interacting to foster innovative, sustainable solutions to problems (Lui et al., 2022). There are seven characteristics exhibited by sustainable and responsible leaders, including providing service to society, valuing both basic and applied contributions within the system, valuing individual and group collaboration, having a methodology for gathering and analyzing information, involving stakeholders, providing value to those stakeholders, and having the capability to broadly share the information about the system (Tsui, 2021). Numerous skills and knowledge base traits were also defined, but ultimately, researchers have shown the complexity of sustainability leadership research. Sustainable leadership practices have a place in entrepreneurship and can be part of a successful small business strategy.

Small business entrepreneurs must think about sustainability just as much as any other organization, although sustainability is not usually a top priority. Wahyuningsih (2024) studied barriers to sustainable success for entrepreneurial businesses, concluding that a lack of knowledge on sustainable practices, consistent motivation to adapt, and knowledge gaps on innovative change ideas still exists within many small businesses and leaders of small businesses will continue to struggle with sustainable operation strategies.

The implementation of sustainable practices that allow an organization to survive changes to the outside environment can sometimes cause tension in an organization if everyone is not viewing the problems the same way or if the motivations and capability to create change are drastically different (Wahyuningsih, 2024).

Transition

Section 2 included a comprehensive literature review of the conceptual framework and research on entrepreneurial ecosystems and leadership strategies leaders of those systems use. The complex adaptive systems conceptual framework has been grounded in a literature review analysis. In the literature review, I looked at the complex adaptive systems conceptual framework as well as other alternatives, including actor-network theory, agency theory, and stakeholder theory, that can be leveraged to describe the complex components of entrepreneurial ecosystems and the strategies leaders of those systems use when working with entrepreneurs. I also looked at the evolution and development of entrepreneurial ecosystems and leadership strategies that entrepreneurial ecosystem leaders may use to support entrepreneurial success, which included adaptive leadership, servant leadership, and sustainability leadership models.

Section 3 includes the purpose statement, role of the researcher in the data collection process, and participants' description, as well as the research method and design, data collection and organization techniques, data analysis, and reliability and validity. In Section 4, the purpose statement will be restated, followed by the presentation of the research findings. Section 4 will also include applications to professional practice,

implications for positive social change, recommendations, reflections on the DBA experience, suggested directions for future research, and a conclusion.

Section 3: Research Project Methodology

In this section, I discuss my role in the research process and provide an overview of participants. I also explain the research methodology and design, population and sampling, participants, ethical research, data collection method, data organization technique, data analysis, and reliability and validity of this research project. I also include interview questions.

Project Ethics

Researchers who serve as the primary research instrument for qualitative studies are required to follow guiding principles of qualitative research in order to ensure in-depth understanding and exploration of a phenomenon. Data collection in qualitative research includes obtaining access to participants, developing dialogue with them related to the purpose of research, organizing and executing the research process, collecting data, and analyzing results (Tenny et al., 2023). As the main research instrument in this project, I prepared for this project by following all required qualitative research guidelines and organized my processes and procedures before conducting interviews. I recruited participants, conducted semistructured interviews, reviewed organizational documentation, organized and analyzed data, and presented findings. Additionally, I reached out to potential interview participants to develop dialogue before interviews to establish relationships in cases where this was necessary.

I possess nearly 10 years of experience as an entrepreneurial ecosystem organizational leader and economic development professional, which has given me an improved understanding of challenges faced by entrepreneurial ecosystem leaders related

to strategies for collaboration and entrepreneurial success. I used these experiences to develop interview questions for this project in order to explore strategies some leaders within entrepreneurial ecosystem organizations used to collaborate in a manner that supported entrepreneurial success. My professional network, which included local, regional, and national leaders of entrepreneurial ecosystem organizations helped me recruit suitable participants for this project.

Researchers may face ethical dilemmas which can be mitigated by adhering to guidelines, codes, and regulations that are enforced by professional associations and review boards. Researchers conducting studies that involve human subjects have a moral duty and obligation to conduct these studies ethically and aligned with the *Belmont Report* protocol and the three fundamental principles within, which are *respect for persons*, *beneficence*, and *justice* (Farrugia, 2019; U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 1979). The first principle, *respect for persons*, is adhered to by acknowledging the participants' autonomy and affording the participants additional protections should they possess limited autonomy (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 1979). The second principle of the *Belmont Report* is *beneficence*, which ensures no harm be brought to study participants while also obtaining the maximum benefits from their study participation (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 1979). Finally, the third principle, *justice*, is a protocol that ensures researchers treat participants fairly, which relates to any potential benefits and burdens from participation in the research study (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 1979).

The *Belmont Report* also has valuable information on applying additional ethical protocols to research studies, that may be particularly useful to novice researchers. Guidance is provided on the important requirements related to the informed consent process, risks and benefits involved in the research study, and participant selection (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 1979). Informed consent in research involves disclosing required information to participants, ensuring participants understand this information, and notifying participants that their participation is strictly voluntary (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 1979). I was responsible for conforming to the *Belmont Report's* ethical principles and the Institutional Review Board's (IRB) requirements.

I did not begin this project until the IRB gave me permission. I also ensured participants had received all necessary information related to this project and their participation, obtained consent that confirmed confidentiality before conducting interviews, and treated participants fairly. Participants have the right to withdraw from the project at any time without penalty by notifying the researcher (Yin, 2018). I notified project participants that they had the right to withdraw from this project at any time without any negative consequences. If participants receive any tangible or intangible benefit, the study may become biased (Jamieson et al., 2023). While there was no financial incentive for participating in this project to avoid potential biases, participants received a thank you note from me for their time and participation and will receive a summary of this project's findings.

I stored data collected electronically within a password-protected filing system. The data will be destroyed after 5 years. Researchers ensure confidentiality by anonymizing data, when possible, securely storing data, and controlling access to the data (Lim, 2024). To ensure confidentiality, participants and their organizations were assigned numbers that only I know, and all identifying information was removed from the data and project reports to prevent connecting responses to specific individuals. The Walden IRB approval number is 05-07-25-1036125.

Nature of the Project

Researchers use the nature of the study to select the most appropriate research method, and for this project, I chose the qualitative research method and the pragmatic inquiry research design. There are three research methods researchers use: qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods (Taherdoost, 2022). Researchers use the qualitative research method when exploring a phenomenon through subjectivity and socially constructed meanings within a natural setting to establish trust, participation, and in-depth understanding to the research question (Taherdoost, 2022). I selected the qualitative research method for this project because I identified and explored a phenomenon in its natural setting through socially constructed meanings.

Researchers use the pragmatic inquiry design when conducting an inductive study that uses and combines established qualitative methods strategically to meet a study's needs, using a conceptual framework as a guide and participants acting within a real-world problem (Ramanadhan et al., 2021). Dewey's (1938) model of inquiry is the foundation for the pragmatic inquiry research design. I selected the pragmatic inquiry

research design because I conducted an inductive project using and combining established qualitative data collection and analysis processes. This project focused on participants acting within a real-world problem. I identified and explored strategies that some leaders within entrepreneurial ecosystem organizations used to collaborate in a manner that supports entrepreneurial success.

Population, Sampling, and Participants

Researchers must select appropriate participants before initiating data collection for the study (McSweeney, 2021). Researchers identify and define the eligibility criteria for participants (Campbell et al., 2020; Cobern & Adams, 2020; McSweeney, 2021) to align participants' characteristics with the study's central research question. Researchers may encounter difficulties such as identifying proper organizations, securing entry into the organizations, and obtaining participant consent to engage in the study (Sullivan et al., 2021). Eligibility criteria for study participation refer to the requirements set by researchers to confirm that participants meet the necessary qualifications (McSweeney, 2021). Individuals qualify to participate in a study if they possess relevant experience and knowledge of the phenomenon being explored (Campbell et al., 2020; Cobern & Adams, 2020).

I set eligibility criteria for this project's participants based on their experience using effective leadership strategies to collaborate in a manner that supported entrepreneurial ecosystem organizations' success. Participants who met the eligibility criteria possessed at least 5 years of experience using effective strategies to collaborate in a manner that supported entrepreneurial success. I purposively identified seven leader

participants for this project from entrepreneurial ecosystem organizations located in the Midwest United States. These leader participants were suitable for this project because of their effective strategies used to collaborate in a manner that supports entrepreneurial success.

Securing access to organizations and participants for a research study is not an easy task (Sullivan et al., 2021). DePoy and Gitlin (2019) suggested that researchers increase their chances of success by compiling a list of businesses from a local chamber of commerce, collaborating with key personnel within these organizations, utilizing additional recruitment strategies, and developing a deeper understanding of the target population. For this project, I communicated with the executive leadership teams of Midwest U.S. entrepreneurial ecosystem organizations, local chambers of commerce, and various professional connections I had established within the entrepreneurial ecosystem field to discuss my intention to conduct this project.

Researchers must build trust and acceptance with participants to create a comfortable interview environment (McGrath et al., 2019). Ensuring participants feel at ease is essential for open and natural conversations, making it the researcher's responsibility to foster this comfort (McGrath et al., 2019). Establishing rapport allows researchers to gather in-depth data (Buys et al., 2022). Consistent interaction with participants is an effective approach to developing trust and rapport (McGrath et al., 2019). In cases where I did not have a prior working relationship with a participant, I engaged with them before the interview to build trust and facilitated the collection of meaningful data.

Researchers must align the overarching research question with participants by choosing a suitable research design (Taherdoost, 2022). Establishing clear eligibility criteria helps identify participants with relevant knowledge and experience in the phenomenon being explored, enabling the researcher to address the research question (Jones & Donmoyer, 2021). Securing qualified participants with the necessary expertise on the phenomenon in question (Jones & Donmoyer, 2021) allowed me to align participants with the research question effectively.

Choosing the proper sampling method is crucial for maintaining a study's credibility (Cobern & Adams, 2020). Purposive sampling is effective in refining the participant pool by ensuring that individuals meet specific criteria relevant to the phenomenon being studied (Memon et al., 2024). This method involves deliberately choosing participants who align with the study's established criteria (Memon et al., 2024). Therefore, I used purposive sampling to focus on participants who met the required qualifications, ensuring the collection of valuable and insightful data.

I collected data from seven entrepreneurial ecosystem organizational leaders located in the Midwest United States, possessing experience using effective strategies used to collaborate in a manner that supported entrepreneurial success. Researchers decide on the sample size by evaluating the study's scope, topic characteristics, data quality, and research design (Campbell et al., 2020). According to Hennink and Kaiser (2022), a small group of participants with knowledge and experience related to the phenomenon under investigation can offer enough interview data for pragmatic inquiry studies, resulting in data saturation. If data saturation had not been achieved after

interviewing the seven participants, I would have proceeded with additional interviews until saturation was reached.

Data saturation is reached when a researcher concludes that further data collection no longer yields new insights (Mwita, 2022). A small number of semistructured interviews can offer the comprehensive information needed to achieve data saturation on the phenomenon under investigation (Cobern & Adams, 2020). Semistructured interviews, which include open-ended questions, helped me gather valuable insights from participants and contributed to reaching data saturation. Eligible participants were invited to join this project through email to secure their consent for participation.

Data Collection Activities

Lincoln and Guba (1985) introduced the idea that the researcher serves as the primary research instrument in qualitative studies. This perspective requires researchers to acknowledge and embrace their role in the data collection process (Tenny et al., 2023). As the key instrument in a pragmatic inquiry research project, researchers gather diverse data through interviews, observations, and document analysis (Tenny et al., 2023). In this project, I served as the primary data collection instrument, conducted semistructured interviews with open-ended questions and analyzed documents and artifacts. A key component of preparation is developing an interview protocol, which outlines important information for participants and provides the researcher with a standardized framework for conducting interviews (Buys et al., 2022). Such protocols include procedural guidelines, scripted introductions and conclusions, consent prompts, and interview questions and prompts (Tenny et al., 2023). For this project, I utilized an interview

protocol (see Appendix A) to maintain consistency in data collection throughout the interview process. The interview questions are found in Appendix B.

Qualitative researchers most often use semistructured interviews consisting of open-ended questions (Elhami & Khoshnevisan, 2022). Semistructured interviews allow researchers to gain insight into participants' perspectives and lived experiences related to the topic being explored (Lim, 2024). An advantage of semistructured interviews is the flexibility to ask follow-up questions, creating an interpretive context, and deepened understanding of the phenomenon (Elhami & Khoshnevisan, 2022). The primary goal of researchers when conducting semistructured interviews is to gather data from experts within the case organization who have direct experience with the phenomenon under investigation (Lim, 2024). For this project, I conducted semistructured interviews of purposively selected participants from chambers of commerce, economic development agencies, and other relevant organizations, ensuring they met specific experience criteria in entrepreneurial ecosystem building. This method allowed for the collection of in-depth, detailed data, which may lead to the identification of new themes, as recommended by several researchers (Buys et al., 2022). While semistructured interviews follow a predetermined set of questions, they also allow for flexibility in asking clarifying questions to ensure a comprehensive understanding of participants' responses (Elhami & Khoshnevisan, 2022). Using this approach enabled me to refine responses in real time and enhanced the richness of the collected data.

I gathered data through semistructured interviews, which were recorded and transcribed, and used an interview protocol (see Appendix A) to guide the process.

Participants responded to predetermined questions outlined in the interview guide (see Appendix A). At the conclusion of the interview, participants had the opportunity to share any final thoughts on leadership strategies employed by entrepreneurial ecosystem resource providers to support entrepreneurial success. Encouraging participants to share additional reflections allows them the opportunity to disclose additional insights or experiences that may not have surfaced during the structured segment of the interview (Roberts, 2020). Recognizing that researchers inherently bring biases into a study (McSweeney, 2021), it is essential to mitigate these influences through researcher reflexivity (Buys et al., 2022). Reflexivity involves critically examining one's thoughts and decisions related to the data collection process (Jamieson et al., 2023). This practice enhances transparency and helps address potential biases in the research (McSweeney, 2021). To ensure objectivity and address any potential biases, I engaged in reflexivity by continuously reflecting on my perspectives and choices throughout this project and documented these reflections for greater research transparency.

Another commonly used data collection method is the review of organizational documents and artifacts (Lim, 2024). When combined with semistructured interviews, organizational documentation review allows researchers to gain deeper insights into the phenomenon under investigation (Shoozan & Mohamad, 2024) and enhances the study's reliability by enabling methodological triangulation (Taherdoost, 2022). Researchers may review various documents, such as annual reports, financial statements, and budgets, to support their analyses (Lim, 2024; Shoozan & Mohamad, 2024). Additionally, these documents may provide valuable details relevant to the case study, such as correct

spellings or event specifics (Taherdoost, 2022). For this project, I reviewed additional materials from websites, social media platforms, downloadable files or articles from relevant sources, and any resources recommended by interview participants that pertained to leadership strategies used by entrepreneurial ecosystem resource providers to foster entrepreneurial success. To strengthen the validity of my findings, I employed methodological triangulation by comparing data obtained from the semistructured interviews with the information obtained from the review documentation to determine if data alignment occurred.

Researchers conduct member checking to enhance the validity and reliability of a study. Member checking is a technique researchers use to enhance the trustworthiness of a study by allowing participants to review, confirm, refine, or clarify aspects of the collected data (Shoozan & Mohamad, 2024). This process involves asking participants to assess the researcher's interpretations of their interview responses to ensure accuracy (Lim, 2024). To strengthen the reliability of my findings, I implemented member checking by providing participants with my interpretations of their responses and requested their feedback to verify the accuracy of my interpretations.

Interview Questions

1. What strategies did you use to successfully collaborate in a manner that supports entrepreneurial success?
2. How did your employees respond to and implement those strategies?
3. How were the strategies to collaborate in a manner that supports entrepreneurial success communicated throughout your organization's

stakeholders and the other agency partners within your area's entrepreneurial ecosystem?

4. What were the key barriers to implementing strategies used to collaborate in a manner that supports entrepreneurial success?
5. How did you overcome the key barriers to implementing strategies used to collaborate in a manner that supports entrepreneurial success?
6. What, if any, modifications did you apply to any strategy used to collaborate in a manner that supports entrepreneurial success?
7. What are the business processes your organization used within your community's entrepreneurial ecosystem to successfully collaborate in a manner that supports entrepreneurial success?
8. What else would you like to add about strategies you used within entrepreneurial ecosystem organizations to collaborate in a manner that supports entrepreneurial success?

Data Organization and Analysis Techniques

Establishing an effective system for organizing data prior to analysis can be advantageous for researchers. Shoozan and Mohamad (2024) advised qualitative researchers to implement a structured approach to data management before beginning the analysis process. Well-planned data organization strategies enhance the rigor of research (Lim, 2024). Structuring data systematically can also improve the efficiency and effectiveness of qualitative analysis (Lim, 2024). To ensure rigor in this project, I developed a comprehensive data organization system.

I conducted semistructured Zoom video interviews with qualified participants using open-ended questions (see Appendix B). Assigning unique participant codes during data collection is an effective method for maintaining confidentiality (Taherdoost, 2022). Data saturation was achieved with seven participants. Each participant was assigned an identifier consisting of the letter "P" followed by numbers between 1 and 7 (i.e., P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, and P7). Additionally, all identifying details were removed from transcripts to protect participant confidentiality. Taherdoost (2022) emphasized that changing participants' names and redacting references to individuals and locations mentioned during interviews further safeguards confidentiality. To reinforce participant confidentiality, I transcribed each interview, eliminated identifying details, and labeled transcripts and related documents with assigned participant codes.

To maintain transparency, I kept an electronic reflexive journal documenting my thoughts, decisions, and reactions throughout the interview process, as well as my approaches to coding and theme identification. Maintaining a reflexive journal supports transparency in research (Lim, 2024) and facilitates bracketing (Karcher et al., 2024). Additionally, reflective journaling allows for detailed documentation of the research process, including observations and reactions to interviews or settings (Karcher et al., 2024).

Researchers should only retain collected data for as long as necessary. Lim (2024) stressed the importance of limiting data retention periods and securing research data appropriately. Data protection guidelines recommend best practices, including (a) defining the purpose of data collection, (b) obtaining informed consent, (c) collecting

only essential information, (d) ensuring data use aligns with research objectives, (e) retaining information only for the required duration, and (f) implementing appropriate security measures (Walden University, 2024). Ethical considerations are also vital in data management. The U.S. Department of Health & Human Services (1979) suggested securely storing physical documents in locked cabinets and digital files on password-protected devices. In compliance with Walden University's requirements, I stored raw data on a password-protected flash drive and will keep it for 5 years. After this period, all electronic files will be deleted, the flash drive will be physically destroyed, and any hard copies will be shredded.

Triangulation strengthens the depth, scope, and credibility of research by incorporating multiple data sources. Methodological triangulation involves using various evidence sources to validate findings (Taherdoost, 2022). This approach allows researchers to gain diverse perspectives on the studied phenomenon (Morgan, 2024). For instance, integrating data from semistructured interviews and organizational document reviews facilitates the development of convergent evidence, enhancing construct validity in qualitative research (Morgan, 2024). In this project, I employed methodological triangulation by comparing interview data with documents and artifacts data to determine if there was data alignment. Additionally, I conducted member checking by sharing my interpretations of participant responses and requested their validation. The member-checked data was cross-referenced with publicly available documents to ensure data alignment.

Qualitative data analysis is an ongoing, iterative process conducted alongside data collection (Ramanadhan et al., 2021). Researchers use various analysis methods, including thematic, content, and discourse analysis (Ramanadhan et al., 2021). Thematic analysis involves repeatedly reviewing interview transcripts to extract meaningful patterns and insights (Fona, 2024). Many researchers utilize CAQDAS tools, such as NVivo and DeDoose, to efficiently classify, organize, and analyze qualitative data (Fona, 2024). These tools also assist in identifying thematic relationships within the data (Fona, 2024).

Analyzing qualitative data involves multiple steps. Braun and Clarke (2022) outlined a 6-step framework for qualitative analysis: (1) familiarizing oneself with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) identifying themes, (4) refining themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) reporting findings. Steps 1 and 2 required deep engagement with the data to establish meaningful codes. Step 3 entailed categorizing data to identify overarching themes across interview transcripts. Fona (2024) recommended using qualitative data analysis software, such as NVivo, to streamline coding and data organization. NVivo enhances efficiency in mapping codes, grouping themes, and identifying relationships within qualitative data (Fona, 2024). After reviewing the identified themes in Step 4, I cross-referenced them with interview transcripts and validated them through member checking, which was Step 5. This process ensured that the final themes accurately reflected participants' perspectives. In the sixth and final step, I compiled this project's findings into this project.

Pragmatic inquiry research incorporates multiple data sources (Ramanadhan et al., 2021). Morgan (2024) noted that triangulation enhances the depth and richness of research findings. Methodological triangulation allows researchers to validate data using diverse sources, such as semistructured interviews and document reviews (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Morgan, 2024). In this project, I employed document analysis as a secondary data source, utilizing publicly available documents and artifacts. Various approaches, such as thematic and content analysis, can be used to examine document data (Morgan, 2024). I conducted content analysis to systematically classify and analyze documents related to this project. This method involves three stages: preparation, organization, and reporting (Ramanadhan et al., 2021). I compared data from document reviews with member-checked data from interviews to identify patterns and ensure data alignment. The final step includes drawing conclusions and making recommendations based on study findings (Braun & Clarke, 2022). These conclusions provided insights that addressed the overarching research question.

Mapping relationships between themes across different data sets enables researchers to identify key themes that address the research question and link these themes to existing literature and theoretical frameworks (Morgan, 2024). Coding data with relevant labels allows for the categorization of major themes (Morgan, 2024). Conducting a frequency analysis helps researchers assess the prevalence of thematic codes within data categories (Nicmanis, 2024). I used NVivo's data-coding capabilities to map key themes, which enhanced this project's trustworthiness. Researchers establish connections between conceptual frameworks, literature, methodology, and findings

(Morgan, 2024; Nicmanis, 2024). I aligned the identified themes with this project's conceptual framework and existing literature to strengthen the research findings.

Reliability and Validity

In qualitative research, reliability and validity are established through Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four widely accepted criteria: dependability, credibility, transferability, and confirmability. These four elements collectively define the concept of trustworthiness in qualitative studies (Mwita, 2022). By prioritizing trustworthiness, researchers address the qualitative equivalent of reliability and validity in quantitative research.

Reliability

The reliability of data is essential in qualitative research. To achieve this goal, researchers must utilize dependable instruments and measurements to ensure the findings are both credible and consistent (Mwita, 2022). In this project, I incorporated two primary sources of evidence common to pragmatic inquiry research: interviews and company documentation, as Taherdoost (2022) recommended. No single data source is inherently superior to others; instead, each contributes valuable and complementary insights (Taherdoost, 2022). A well-structured qualitative pragmatic inquiry project integrates multiple sources of evidence to strengthen the findings.

Dependability refers to the unwavering nature of properly conducting research across time (Ahmed, 2024). To enhance dependability, I used a standardized set of interview questions across all participants, as suggested by multiple scholars (Ahmed, 2024; Mwita, 2022). Additionally, I implemented member checking to validate the accuracy of the collected data. Member checking involves presenting participants with

the researcher's interpretation of their responses to verify its accuracy (Lim, 2024; Shoozan & Mohamad, 2024). This approach helps mitigate researcher bias and ensures that the findings remain grounded in participants' perspectives (Lim, 2024).

Recording interviews allows researchers to revisit and analyze responses accurately, ensuring reliable transcription and thematic analysis (Demirci, 2024). To minimize personal biases, I encouraged interviewees to provide detailed responses and requested further elaboration when necessary. To maintain the integrity of participant perspectives, I refrained from discussing details about this project before the interviews, as recommended by Demirci (2024). Adhering to a structured interview protocol and avoiding the introduction of new questions further enhances consistency and reliability, as Shoozan and Mohamad (2024) suggested.

Validity

Credibility, transferability, and confirmability form the foundation of research validity (Shoozan & Mohamad, 2024). To establish credibility, researchers employing a qualitative pragmatic inquiry design collect data through multiple methods and cross-check for consistency to ensure data alignment (Lim, 2024; Shoozan & Mohamad, 2024). In cases where a single researcher conducts the analysis, credibility relies on ensuring that the data is comprehensive and representative (Gaddefors & Cunningham, 2024). A thorough review of interview transcripts strengthens credibility (Demirci, 2024; Lim, 2024; Shoozan & Mohamad, 2024). I carefully examined transcripts to ensure that participants' perspectives were accurately captured and identified both similarities and

differences across respondents. Member checking was conducted before data analysis to validate interview data, as recommended by experts (Cobern & Adams, 2020).

Transferability pertains to the extent to which findings can be applied to other contexts (Demirci, 2024). In qualitative pragmatic inquiry research, ensuring transferability involves selecting appropriate participants, providing detailed demographic information, conducting thorough data analysis, and presenting findings in an easy-to-understand manner (Mwita, 2022). I enhanced this project's transferability by carefully choosing project participants, documenting demographic details comprehensively, conducting in-depth analyses, and presenting the results in a clear and intuitive format.

Confirmability, which follows dependability, credibility, and transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), ensures that research findings are derived from participants' responses rather than researcher bias (Taherdoost, 2022). To uphold confirmability, I actively listened to participants, documented my reflections, and remained aware of potential biases. Additionally, I transcribed interviews meticulously, established a clear connection between data and findings, and used relevant literature to reinforce the credibility of the results.

Methodological triangulation plays a crucial role in enhancing case study validity (Mwita, 2022; Taherdoost, 2022). This approach involves utilizing multiple data sources to compare and assess alignment (Mwita, 2022). In this project, I implemented methodological triangulation by comparing data collected from semistructured interviews with data collected from my review of documents and artifacts and found that both sets of

data had aligned. Since pragmatic inquiry research emphasizes the collection of data from diverse sources, methodological triangulation serves as a core strategy for ensuring research validity (Ahmed, 2024).

To strengthen this project's rigor, I ensured that data saturation was reached. Data saturation occurs when additional data collection no longer yields new, meaningful insights (Ahmed, 2024). Without achieving saturation, research conclusions may lack completeness (Shoozan & Mohamad, 2024). Therefore, I continued data collection and analysis until no further meaningful new information emerged that could enhance this project's findings.

Transition and Summary

In Section 3, I presented a discussion of the following subsections: project ethics; nature of this project; population, sampling, and participants; data collection activities; interview questions; data organization and analysis techniques; reliability and validity; and the transition and summary. In Section 4, I will present the findings, provide the business contributions and recommendations for professional practice, overview the implications for positive social change, and give the recommendations for further research and the conclusion.

Section 4: Application of Professional Practice and Implications for Change

In Section 4, I outline this project's purpose, reintroduce the central research question, and present project findings. I also explore how results of this project can be applied in professional situations, discuss its potential impact on social change, and offer suggestions for future research and action. Personal insights are shared, followed by final remarks.

The purpose of this qualitative pragmatic inquiry research project was to identify and explore strategies some leaders within entrepreneurial ecosystem organizations use to collaborate in a manner that supports entrepreneurial success. I conducted individual video interviews with seven Midwest United States leaders who had at least 5 years of experience using effective collaborative strategies that supported entrepreneurial success. Other sources of data included publicly available organizational documents and artifacts, including annual reports, downloadable organizational case studies, relevant project studies, social media content, and additional resources that were recommended by participants. Analysis of data resulted in three themes, which are (a) entrepreneurial ecosystems need a champion, (b) certain leadership traits and styles are more effective in fostering a successful entrepreneurial ecosystem, and (c) entrepreneurial ecosystems play a vital role in community economic development strategies. Theme 1 also includes a subtheme involving entrepreneurs as active voices in ecosystem development.

Presentation of the Findings

The overarching research question for this qualitative pragmatic inquiry research project was: What strategies do leaders within entrepreneurial ecosystem organizations

use to collaborate in a manner that supports entrepreneurial success? To answer the overarching research question, I conducted semistructured interviews with entrepreneurial ecosystem organizational leaders from the Midwest United States with the requisite experience. In addition, I reviewed publicly available documentation and artifacts to obtain data from several additional sources, allowing me to conduct methodological triangulation.

Theme 1: Entrepreneurial Ecosystems Need a Champion

The first theme derived from data analysis is that entrepreneurial ecosystems need a champion to begin and lead organizational conversations. According to Roundy and Evans (2024), leadership is itself a complicated practice where individuals can influence others to achieve a common goal. The complexity of entrepreneurial ecosystem leadership was a common talking point with all interviewed leaders (i.e., P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, and P7). Additionally, the concept of having a champion leader, or person or entity to lead the charge on ecosystem activities and conversations, was commonly mentioned as a method of navigating leadership challenges throughout the organizations involved in an ecosystem.

P1, P4, P5, P6, and P7 addressed the importance of champions, with varying views regarding personal and professional qualities that individuals or entities should exhibit. For instance, P1 stated:

Probably more important than whichever host organization you have is who are the champions that tie you back to your development community and are some of those entrepreneurs. Because they tend to keep this honest, they don't have a lot

of patience for the turf games and stuff . . . As a general rule, we're looking for an organization that is viewed as a non-threat to the other organizations. But that threat is always rooted in the personalities of the board and the staff.

Varying kinds of organizations that could become involved in ecosystem building and operations, particularly in rural Midwest communities, lead to the possibility of forcing organizations to revisit potential historical working relationship issues, personality discrepancies, and types of work that vary from core mission and plans. P6 described experiences of discussing the best fit for communities when seeking to create an entrepreneurial ecosystem and how to identify the champion and said:

My experience points to the need for an organization that can act as a platform for collaboration. A place where people from different interests and areas can come together, meet, build relationships, and build collective intent and activity. That's different in every community. In some communities, that might naturally be the position of a chamber of commerce, or the mayor's office, or a university. In many communities, that organization doesn't exist. What is actually more powerful is to gather a group and a community of people, and then co-create and work together to establish that organization or entity that is the platform entity . . .

The cutting edge of the practice is, in my observation, the creation of these platform groups, or some people call them backbone organizations.

The creation or identification of a champion individual or organization to lead entrepreneurial ecosystem-building activities alleviates historical working relationship challenges and allows for the collaborative nature that is ecosystem building to become

embedded in these activities from the outset. Fuentes et al. (2024) uncovered that individuals and organizations of an entrepreneurial ecosystem simultaneously cooperate and compete with one another to help entrepreneurs, so it is imperative that organizational leaders recognize this fact and determine the best way to champion entrepreneurial support efforts without working against a collaborative partner.

Entrepreneurs Must Be An Active Voice in Ecosystem Development

A subtheme that emerged from the data analysis was that entrepreneurs must be an active voice in ecosystem development. While this may seem obvious to some, in my interviews, it was noted that too many entrepreneurial ecosystem organizations and their leaders neglect to bring active and potential entrepreneurs to the ecosystem development conversation. Feld and Hathaway (2020) noted seven variations of capital that entrepreneurial ecosystems need to operate, which include human, intellectual, cultural, financial, institutional, network, and physical capital. The interview conducted with P1 included conversation about this topic from two perspectives, the first being initial ecosystem planning. P1 stated:

That's why we really pivoted to the idea of saying don't just start building resources. They're going, 'we're going to provide workshops for business planning.' Well, maybe that's great. But do your entrepreneurs really want that? What we found is, by and large, they don't. They want one-on-one resource navigation, maybe with a business coach who helps them with business planning. The same thing we'd tell an entrepreneur is to talk to your customers and figure out what they really want and what they'll pay for it and do the same thing here.

The conversation with P1 continued from a second perspective, that being the most important resources entrepreneurs need from ecosystems and why it is critical for entrepreneurs to be involved with the activities and development of entrepreneurial ecosystems. P1 also stated:

We tend to assume what the entrepreneur needs before we actually talk to our entrepreneurs to find out what they need. For most of these rural communities, creating venture capital is a waste of time. These entrepreneurs are not high growth. They are so far away from needing venture capital. What they need is some gap financing that gets them a bank loan that gets them going. That was a huge challenge for our leaders and our rural communities to really understand. Once they did, then we saw a huge acceleration in their success.

Entrepreneurs are often an underrepresented voice at the entrepreneurial ecosystem table because of the other community-driven organizations taking the brunt of the planning, decision-making, and funding of initiatives. P5 stated that an entrepreneurial ecosystem is successful when “the founder gets the resources that he or she needs in a timely manner and an informed manner”, which is best accomplished by talking directly to entrepreneurs. This may, at times, be counterintuitive to the ecosystem’s plans, but as noted by Lin and Yi (2023), a sound practice of adaptive leaders is to provide the support to problems with an ability to act swiftly when the needs of the system change. Ensuring entrepreneurs have a voice in how the entrepreneurial ecosystem operates allows for flexibility and adaptability to respond to their needs as they change.

In reviewing a publicly available document for a community represented by one of the project participants, it was noted that the local government charges the community's economic development organization with conducting an annual survey of entrepreneurs to uncover business support needs and identify areas where additional assistance could be provided. Common business assistance measures may include financial, talent, and knowledge resources as well as business planning templates and models (Schaft & Füller, 2023). As Xu et al. (2023) noted, these services and resources provided by entrepreneurial ecosystem leaders are essential to the startup creation and survival process, as well as provide insights from the entrepreneurs and stakeholders who would use the resources the most on what is most important to them.

Another publicly available resource guide was recommended by a participant on the topic of starting the entrepreneurial ecosystem-building process. Through reviewing the guide, I gained a further understanding of the fact that a dedicated champion within an entrepreneurial ecosystem is crucial for success. In the champion document, successful entrepreneurial ecosystems were noted to have four factors: a small band of champions, an ever-expanding group of empowering leaders, an increasing number of community builders, and resulting community support and engagement. As stated by Yang and Zhang (2022), an entrepreneurial ecosystem leader, or possibly a dedicated champion, can coordinate the complex components of the ecosystem's participants and ensure the required collaboration occurs.

Correlation of Theme 1 to the Literature

The findings noted in Theme 1 aligned with findings from various researchers as part of the literature review for this project and with other more recent studies not included in the literature review. For instance, the champion ecosystem leader, whether an individual or organization, plays a key role in shaping and nurturing the success of the whole ecosystem (Nave et al., 2025). Some entrepreneurial ecosystem leaders simply look to other established systems and copy their programming with a different group of individuals (Bendickson et al., 2025). A champion best suited to manage the elements of an entrepreneurial ecosystem should be one that is mindful of the resources available to the community and available through various collaborative partners and be willing to listen to the entrepreneurs on what they need most.

Additionally, the theme and subtheme aligned with the findings of Donaldson (2021), who noted that the entrepreneurial ecosystem is not its own organization, but is comprised of existing geographically and culturally similar individuals and organizations providing support services and resources through entrepreneur-centric interactions. Entrepreneur-centric interactions are crucial to the success of the entrepreneurial ecosystem and cannot be overlooked, as the purpose of entrepreneurial ecosystems is to connect entrepreneurs to their local environments and assets, as well as other resources and capital (Roundy & Im, 2025). As Ahmadi and Soga (2022) stated, barriers to success for an entrepreneur include cognitive distortions related to self-efficacy, motivation, and interest in the idea; social capital concerns related to biases, community support, and other stereotypes; and financial and startup experience barriers. Tactically working

towards removing those obstacles promotes a more entrepreneurial friendly ecosystem and drives the resilience of both the ecosystem and the entrepreneur (Nave et al., 2025). The fear of failure and uncertainty entrepreneurs face in their pursuits may be mitigated with more entrepreneurs' presence in the ecosystem.

Correlation of Theme 1 to the Conceptual Framework

Theme 1 aligned with the characteristics of complex adaptive systems, including the components of complex adaptive systems being self-organization, open-but-distinct boundaries, complex components, nonlinearity, adaptability, and sensitivity to initial conditions (Fuentes et al., 2024; Roundy et al., 2018), particularly the complex components characteristic. The complex components include every individual, organization, and project involved within the interconnected ecosystem, as well as the processes and structures in place for each of those individual elements, and the way they operate and adapt individually and within the larger system (Rapuno & Valickas, 2023). The potential number of complex components an entrepreneurial ecosystem leader may face varies and could be very high if there are many capable ecosystem partners in the community, highlighting the importance of a champion to organize and convene the resources.

The theme also relates to nonlinearity, the fourth characteristic of the complex adaptive systems framework. The interdependent complex components of entrepreneurial ecosystems lead to feedback loops or opportunities for activities to feed back onto themselves either directly or through further interventions (Roundy et al., 2018). Roundy et al. (2018) continued by indicating some entrepreneurial ecosystem leaders may wish to

simplify these activities, and one way to keep feedback loops limited is to limit the voices at the table if new ideas run counter to current plans. However, Kazakov et al. (2021) underscored the importance of managing new complex ideas over attempts to simplify the structures. This is the reason the entrepreneur voice, while different from industry leaders, economic developers, and similar agents, needs to be involved to share what entrepreneurs truly need from their ecosystem and its leaders.

Theme 2: Certain Leadership Traits and Styles Are More Effective in Fostering a Successful Entrepreneurial Ecosystem

The second theme uncovered from data analysis is that certain leadership traits and styles are more effective in fostering the creation, implementation, and sustainability of a successful entrepreneurial ecosystem. According to Yang and Zhang (2022), entrepreneurial ecosystem leaders must adopt a balanced strategy wherein the self-organization of the network's individual actors are balanced with active coordination and cooperation. In discussing the composition of entrepreneurial ecosystems with interview participants, all participants recognized that these individual ecosystem actors often represent a different established organization that operates with its own mission, vision, and strategies for accomplishing their own goals. In interviews for this project, P1, P3, and P6 indicated the possibility for situations to arise where an ecosystem actor must navigate competing strategic priorities between their organization and the larger entrepreneurial ecosystem, and certain leadership traits and styles were discussed in interviews as essential for navigating these complexities.

Working with a variety of organizations comes with challenges from both the organizational and personnel leadership lenses. P3 stated the following about the challenges that come from attempting to collaborate with multiple organizations:

As it goes with all collaboration, it's not perfect. Some of the barriers I've run into include strategic plans that don't perfectly align. Sometimes we're working with organizations that are volunteer-based. So, I can't always depend on a timely response. A lot of these positions are just bogged down with work. And I don't get timely responses, so that makes it hard to plan things like events. Because we do need timely responses, and we need details solidified so that we can get things on the calendar and have a long enough runway to promote. But those can be a challenge working with other organizations that don't have either the same staff support or the capacity to get me those answers.

Organizational politics, personality conflicts, and similar issues can get in the way of a successful entrepreneurial ecosystem. These issues were discussed by P3 as well, who had a unique frame of reference coming into an established program and navigating organizational politics they were previously unaware of. P3 also discussed strategies used to collaborate more effectively within this area:

When I took on this role, the group that kind of organizes and orchestrates our ecosystem was a well-standing program, and when I jumped in there were some politics, some I was aware of and some I was not. Originally, my strategy was aggressive because I knew it needed to get done. Since then, I have pulled off that gas pedal a little bit to focus on those relationships . . . There have been some

polarizing politics that got between some organizations. Instead of leaning into those politics, I just made sure that I was building the bridge to make sure that organization always knew that they were welcome to collaborate with our group. Because at the end of the day, we had a similar mission, and our mission was to help entrepreneurs . . . That is the goal of [program] and I think we could get past some of those macro politics.

In this project, I found that relationship building and addressing any of those historical organizational issues were a crucial element of entrepreneurial ecosystem building if the ultimate success of that ecosystem is important to the actors involved. According to Northouse (2021), leaders must learn to embrace discomfort and identify new solutions through adaptive leadership strategies. This is something that must also come down to the individual leader, or the person who is sitting at the entrepreneurial ecosystem table representing an organization. As Northouse noted, holistic leadership focuses on the behavior of the leader, particularly through servant leadership practices, and the leadership behavior of the individual actor in the ecosystem will influence its success. P6 described the individual leader as a crucial element to overall ecosystem success:

Organizational culture is the invisible barrier that makes this work difficult. Or it's the magical elixir that makes this work go well. The culture of the individual leader the way the person acts, is, behaves, leaders, propagates itself into the community the ecosystem person is building. If they're working within an organization, the culture of that organization will propagate into the ecosystem. If the individual culture or the organizational culture is top-down transactional, non-

human-centered, that culture will propagate into the network because the person and the organization spread its culture just be existing and in reverse.

In reviewing a publicly available case study article on the formation of one of the champion entrepreneurial ecosystem networks, the relationships between certain organizational leaders and long-held historical beliefs about the working relationships between the ecosystem organizational actors were described as some of the most significant barriers to the ecosystem's initial successes. The article included statements from other community leaders indicating that while conversations for better collaboration had occurred between the organizations, it was evident that this collaboration was not happening. According to Lin and Yi (2023), the ability for leaders to act swiftly when the needs of the system change is an adaptive leadership style and one that would be beneficial to enact when faced with a situation where the current leadership practices are not working.

Another publicly available document reviewed was an exploratory assessment of another champion community's ecosystem efforts. In the document, the cultural and social conditions of the ecosystem network were evaluated alongside metrics of success for the entrepreneurs working with actors within the system. The assessment ultimately showed correlations between perceived entrepreneurial success and increased rates of potential entrepreneurial activity within the community when the entrepreneurs were working with relational, well-connected individual actors. This finding aligns with Greenleaf's (1970) servant leadership perspectives and the need for servant-first practices

in this work. As Northouse (2021) continued, servant leaders are those that create value, empower their followers, and help them grow and succeed.

Correlation of Theme 2 to the Literature

The findings in Theme 2 aligned with the findings from other recent research studies including those found in the literature review located above. For example, entrepreneurial ecosystem leaders may need to practice different leadership styles if they are to encourage and sustain the entrepreneurial activity of the ecosystem (Clark et al., 2021). Relationship building activities are core to developing a strong entrepreneurial ecosystem and networking activities are crucial engagement tactics for ecosystem development and sustainability (Harima et al., 2024). One possible leadership style some entrepreneurial ecosystem leaders may wish to practice more is servant leadership.

Forming a startup company is a difficult task for a would-be entrepreneur. The success of the effort, in part, is driven by the attitude and behaviors of the entrepreneur as well as the attitudes of any ecosystem actors working alongside the entrepreneur (Alikhani & Shahriari, 2025). An ecosystem actor would find value in displaying servant leadership styles when working with the entrepreneur, as this style of leadership supports empowerment, innovativeness, and proactive behaviors for success (Alikhani & Shahriari, 2025). What is difficult for some ecosystem leaders to understand, as researched by Postula (2024), is that servant leadership cannot simply be implemented into organizations through procedures or other processes, implementation is not an overnight process, and it is the leader's responsibility to foster the conditions for nurturing the growth and development of the activities within the ecosystem.

As Lan et al. (2021) found, servant leadership requires a leader to go beyond their own self-interest and model servant leader behaviors to help their followers grow. A champion leading with the practices of servant leadership should make conscious efforts to put others, like entrepreneurs, before themselves or their own organization (Northouse, 2021). This may be more difficult for some organizations to do, such as chambers of commerce or economic development organizations that have many stakeholders and programs. However, as Ekmekcioglu and Öner (2024) found, a servant leader of organizations of this type will find that they are empowering those around them and the deep moral commitment of the leader will inspire those around them.

Correlation of Theme 2 to the Conceptual Framework

Theme 2 aligned with various characteristics of complex adaptive systems, particularly the unique element of adaptability, as explained by several researchers (Fuentes et al., 2024; Roundy et al., 2018). As previously noted, Abdalla and Nakagawa (2022) described adaptability as a key for any organization to become more innovative and sustainable. The leadership styles described in the literature review, including adaptive, servant, and sustainable leadership styles, offer a variety of strategies and possibilities for leaders to use when determining the activities of an entrepreneurial ecosystem.

Additionally, another element of complex adaptive systems that aligns with Theme 2 is sensitivity to initial conditions. Shi et al. (2021) defined these initial conditions as the models and structures of the internal systems (or the individual actor organizations). From reviewing publicly available documents on the relationships

between two organizations and how those relationships impacted the success of the ecosystem, it is important for those systems to be reviewed and understood, as well as adapted regularly to any of the countless possible conditions that may force a change.

Theme 3: Entrepreneurial Ecosystems Play a Vital Role in Community Economic Development Strategies

The third theme that emerged from the data analysis was how entrepreneurial ecosystems play a vital role in community economic development strategies.

Communities experience a growth in economic development opportunities through various means, including increased tax revenues used to make community enhancements, such as improving parks, adding social programs, and adding incentives for entrepreneurs to start and grow businesses (“Invigorating entrepreneurial ecosystems”, 2020).

Traditional economic development is often described as business expansion or relocation, funded through private and public investments, and seen to the outside population as the kinds of projects that create jobs, are high-growth, or are highly profitable (Crisp et al., 2024). Entrepreneurship does not inherently line up with those traditional views of economic development, but supporting entrepreneurship and adding resources for these activities is just as, if not more, important to a community’s economic development (Soremekum et al., 2025). All project participants mentioned economic development in their interviews, with P3 and P7 adding valuable insights for this theme.

During the interview with P3, economic development for an entire community was discussed at length, particularly as it relates to numerous community partners

collaborating for entrepreneurial success. When discussing how to get all the right people in the room, P3 stated:

I don't have this equitable approach to the ecosystem. I have an entrepreneur approach to the ecosystem. Whoever wants to create the best program, whoever has the best idea, that's what we're going to go with. Because at the end of the day, it's more competitive. It's a better product, better service for the entrepreneurs. If another organization comes up with a better solution or wants to be part of that solution, then game on, bring them in.

P3 continued by stating their own views of how value-added economic development had changed, and what mattered most to the entrepreneurs likewise changed over time:

I think that showing up and being present in different social settings is really important for entrepreneurs. Just for the sake of networking, getting to know different players in our local economy on the entrepreneurs' behalf is really important. We should operate in a way that we assume that our entrepreneurs don't know as many people as we do (in our roles), and it's our job and our strategy to find those key players for them. It's really worked out in making sure our entrepreneurs are connected with the right people at a faster pace, so that we can hopefully keep them locally.

Ahmadi and Soga (2022) identified barriers to entrepreneurial success that included knowing the right people, motivation, and access to and knowledge of available resources. Similar to P3, P7 described a change in how they viewed their part of

supporting the economic development of their community through the actions they could take to support entrepreneurs:

I used to have a different metric for myself personally as an ecosystem builder, and that was I wanted to introduce the most entrepreneurs to their first customer. It drove me to say, who are impactful relationships that I can make? I tell entrepreneurs this all the time: “Here, if my phone was your phone, who could you now be connected to?” And how do you create the least amount of friction in the ecosystem? If you think about friction as, if only I just knew how to get a hold of X person. What happens if that was removed in your life, and you were able to build a network tomorrow? Use my network as yours.

Expanding on that, P7 discussed working with economic development practitioners, and how economic development is traditionally achieved and how that can conflict with entrepreneurial needs:

Your community should be organized around the founder and what their needs are. And in many ways, we’ve built systems in a different manner, and many ecosystems that fail to put the founder in the central lens tend to have less success than those who do. For example, when you put a chamber of commerce, or a technology association, or a university, or a particular corporation as the number one player in that ecosystem serving the needs of those stakeholders, or a venture capitalist or a venture capital association or an angel group, the needs of (that group) are not the needs of a founder. And some of those needs may be in direct

conflict. You really do have to ask yourself, what is the purpose behind driving an entrepreneurial ecosystem?

Entrepreneurial ecosystems may be represented by various kinds of organizations and individuals that help entrepreneurs, and not all of them operate within traditional economic development processes. As Fuentes et al. (2024) stated, there still does not exist one definitive framework or way of operating an entrepreneurial ecosystem, but these findings point to real economic development that can come from the chaotic nature and activities of entrepreneurial ecosystems.

In reviewing publicly accessible documents on the topic, a champion organization shared a series of studies measuring success in entrepreneurial ecosystems, aligning ecosystem success with traditional economic development metrics. While measuring the success of an entrepreneurial ecosystem can be difficult and there is no one-size-fits-all approach, the document provided ideas on how to purposefully measure ecosystem success. This includes qualitative stakeholder accountability tracking of activities, progress tracking of individual entrepreneurs through programming and services, and monetary contributions made through investors, partners, or other funding measures.

Another publicly available document that was reviewed was a case study and interview with an ecosystem leader who was involved with the community's government as well as an economic development organization and a partner of the region's established entrepreneurial ecosystem. Throughout the document, the interviewed ecosystem leader described the potential impact cities could see from entrepreneurial growth and impact but acknowledged some success will only come from local and

regional policymakers at the government level being willing to take the risk on entrepreneurship and invest more in it.

Correlation of Theme 3 to the Literature

The findings noted in Theme 3 relate to the entrepreneurial ecosystem and entrepreneurial success aspects of this project. An entrepreneurial ecosystem is defined as a collective network of individuals, organizations, and institutions working together to create opportunities for small businesses and entrepreneurs for a community and its citizens (Roundy, 2021). In this definition, there are numerous stakeholders listed: individuals, organizations, institutions, small businesses, entrepreneurs, community, and citizens (Soremekum et al., 2025). To properly support entrepreneurial success, entrepreneurial ecosystems need to be viewed as a core element of economic development, but one that will not fit within traditional economic development formats.

Correlation of Theme 3 to the Conceptual Framework

Theme 3 relates to the conceptual framework due to the complexity of all the individuals and systems involved in economic development for a community. Akinboade et al. (2023) recognized the numerous components of complex adaptive systems and how there are steps within the framework that are themselves individually complicated to explain. These complexities exist as the components of the complex adaptive systems framework can occur nonlinearly, be either dependent or independent of other system components, and assessed using metrics for success that vary between the numerous sets of relationships within the system (Akinboade et al., 2023). Economic development organizations track a lot of various data to determine business and community success,

and entrepreneurial success has many variations to how it is best tracked and explained. Due to this ongoing complexity, entrepreneurial ecosystems add another layer of complexity to economic development organizations.

Applications to Professional Practice

This project's findings may offer significant contributions to the professional practice of entrepreneurial ecosystem development, coordination, and success, particularly as it pertains to leadership strategies that may be used throughout the ecosystem's existence and may improve the success and confidence of future entrepreneurs. Several strategies emerged from this project that entrepreneurial ecosystem leaders and actors of the individual organizations within the ecosystem could adopt to ensure the success of said ecosystem. Theme 1 related to the necessity for a champion to take some level of leadership for coordinating the activities of the ecosystem. Roundy and Evans (2024) corroborated the importance of such leadership, particularly when there are many different actors involved. This finding has implications for the development activities of entrepreneurial ecosystems, with a specific opportunity for entrepreneurs to be pointedly sought after at the early stages of ecosystem creation.

This project has additional implications for the professional practice of leading entrepreneurial ecosystems through the findings of Theme 2. This theme showcased the importance of certain leadership traits and styles when working across different organizations, particularly when those organizations have unique and distinct missions and strategic goals. These findings were corroborated by those of Harima et al. (2024), as

they explained the importance of relationship-building activities as a crucial element for trust building and future working relationships within an ecosystem.

Finally, Theme 3 has implications for business and professional practice, as it relates to the larger scope of community economic development. I found that entrepreneurial ecosystems play a larger role in traditional economic development for communities. These findings are supported by existing literature, including the work of Soremekum et al. (2025), who indicated traditional economic development does not inherently align with the opportunities an entrepreneurial ecosystem may produce for a community, but that does not indicate a lack of economic development impact and in fact, more attention needs to be paid to entrepreneurship and its impact on overall community economic development.

Based on these findings, various recommendations can be made for individuals who serve as leaders within an entrepreneurial ecosystem. For individual organizational leaders, there exists an opportunity to ensure the right fit or right person is sitting at the ecosystem table. As relationship building is an important aspect of ecosystem development, an organizational leader will find value in being honest with themselves on who is the best fit for representing their organization for this important collaborative role. Additionally, this allows opportunities to build new collaborations and partnerships as the best fitting leadership styles establish themselves within the network. There is also a possibility of improved understanding of the value of entrepreneurship to the larger community's economic development forecast and the potential for more community-based support of entrepreneurial ecosystem activities. This project addresses the practical

gaps in these areas by providing a grounded approach to leadership strategies that should be used in an entrepreneurial ecosystem for startup success.

Implications for Social Change

Effective leadership strategies used by leaders within entrepreneurial ecosystems have the potential to create positive social change in numerous ways as reflected by the findings of Themes 1, 2, and 3. In this project, I found that successful entrepreneurial ecosystems in the rural communities of the Midwest United States were those that utilized a champion to shepherd activities and maintain the goals of the larger ecosystem (i.e., Theme 1). As noted by Nave et al. (2025), these champions are critical to the overall ecosystem success. Theme 2 addressed the importance for certain leadership traits and styles to be used when the individual actors of an entrepreneurial ecosystem gather and collaborate. The implications for positive social change these leadership styles may produce includes an enhanced ability to create value, empower followers, and help entrepreneurs grow and succeed (Northouse, 2021). Theme 3 described the importance entrepreneurial ecosystems play in a community's larger economic development initiatives. By recognizing entrepreneurship as an important piece of a community's economic development strategies, entrepreneurs will find their level of support increased as there will be fewer barriers to success (Ahmadi & Soga, 2022) and public support of entrepreneurial ecosystem initiatives.

This project's findings highlight broader social implications for rural Midwest United States communities that have an entrepreneurial ecosystem present. Ecosystems that are coordinated by a champion, led by certain leadership traits and styles, and

recognized as important to larger economic development initiatives have the potential to contribute to the community's economic stability, increase tax base contributions, reinvest in social infrastructure, and be part of countless potential community-specific development projects. When communities support entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial ecosystem partners, they are supporting the dreams of its residents and the sustainable future of the community. This project's findings may encourage organizational and community leaders, as well as other readers, to increase their support of entrepreneurial leadership activities in their communities, as the reinvestment opportunities are infinite.

Recommendations for Action

The recommendations for action for leaders within entrepreneurial ecosystem organizations come from the three themes discussed in this project. I conducted semistructured interviews and reviewed publicly accessible documents as part of determining those themes. In this project, I found that entrepreneurial ecosystem organizational leaders should develop the following leadership strategies to increase the likelihood of entrepreneurial success.

- A. Determine the right person to represent each individual organization as well as the best fit for a champion to shepherd ecosystem activities. Particularly at the development stages of an entrepreneurial ecosystem, it is important to recognize the capabilities of those in the room, the network they have, as well as time available to commit to the effort. It is not always the leader of an individual organization who is best fit for this role.

- B. Improve relationship building efforts by encouraging certain leadership traits over others and seeking certain styles out.
- C. Explain the role of entrepreneurial ecosystems and entrepreneurship to community government and/or economic development agencies.

I will give each interviewee of this project a summary of these findings.

Additionally, to increase exposure of this research, I will have this project published in the ProQuest database for dissertations. I also hope to improve the effectiveness and success of entrepreneurial ecosystems wherever possible, so I will also format this project to meet the guidelines of scholarly journals and submit for potential publication.

Recommendations for Further Research

This qualitative pragmatic inquiry project comprised a limited sample of seven participants from seven organizations that operate within larger community entrepreneurial ecosystems located in the Midwest United States. The limitations of this small sample size and specific location may not accurately reflect the best practices of all entrepreneurial ecosystems. I would encourage future researchers with an interest in entrepreneurial ecosystem development and success to expand the sample size beyond seven participants and increase the demographic footprint of those participants.

In this project, I used the qualitative research methodology, which could be reevaluated through a quantitative or mixed-methods approach in future studies. Changing the methodology for data collection would establish if the results corresponded with the established themes of the current project as well as provide additional knowledge to the overall professional practice. Additionally, this project was limited to

entrepreneurial ecosystem organizational leaders with at least 5 years of experience. Future researchers may wish to investigate the leadership makeup of the ecosystem, the needed leadership styles, and the role of entrepreneurship in economic development from the lens of other participants. These participants may be established community entrepreneurs, public members or consumers, and other employees of the ecosystem organizations. Future researchers may also wish to investigate the overarching phenomenon in other geographic areas and compare successes in that regard.

Reflections

As I reflect on my journey to finish the Doctor of Business Administration program, I find myself starting with the difficult elements of the past years. During my first online residency (a byproduct of starting this program during the COVID-19 pandemic), it was explained to all of us in attendance that the strain of this program is immense, and you should limit major life changes that could impact your ability to focus. I am grateful that a crystal ball to the future was not available then, as I may have decided against this project if I knew I would soon meet my now-husband, move three times, sell two homes and buy another, lose a parent, and experience the many ups and downs of physical and mental health.

However, all those challenges were part of this journey, and I would not be the person I am today without having gone through them. I am grateful to have been able to attend Walden University, to all the instructors and advisors I worked with through the years, and to my project chair, Dr. Jorge Gaytan, who provided unwavering support

through all the ups and downs, and a reminder every now and then to focus on the here and now.

Conclusion

In this qualitative pragmatic inquiry project, I answered the following question: What strategies do leaders within entrepreneurial ecosystem organizations use to collaborate in a manner that supports entrepreneurial success? I conducted semistructured interviews with seven entrepreneurial ecosystem organizational leaders from areas of the Midwest United States as well as reviewed publicly available documents. Three themes emerged from this project: (a) entrepreneurial ecosystems need a champion to navigate the complexities of such a system, along with the entrepreneur needing to be involved in ecosystem development; (b) certain leadership traits and styles are most beneficial to the success of the ecosystem; and (c) entrepreneurial ecosystems are vital to community economic development initiatives. I used Mockler's (1968) complex adaptive systems theory as the conceptual framework for this project.

I found opportunities to successfully navigate the complexity of these ecosystems that may help individuals who serve as leaders within an entrepreneurial ecosystem. Recognizing the relationship-based elements of entrepreneurial ecosystems and the trust needed to work across organizational boundaries in this manner are vital and foundational for the ecosystem's development and success. As Roundy (2021) described, an entrepreneurial ecosystem is a collective network of individuals, organizations, and institutions working together to create opportunities for small businesses and entrepreneurs for a community and its citizens. This fact does not replace the

opportunities an individual organization would provide to these small businesses and entrepreneurs but offers connection and reasoning to the defined themes. These results may address gaps in the literature by providing detailed, practical insights that entrepreneurial ecosystem organizational leaders can use to collaborate more fully with other partners and support the entrepreneurs of their greater community.

References

- Abdalla, S., & Nakagawa, K. (2022). Entrepreneurial leadership, supply chain innovation, and adaptability: A cross-national investigation. *Operations Research Forum*, 3(1), 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s43069-022-00135-x>
- Ahmadi, A., & Soga, L. R. (2022). To be or not to be: Latent entrepreneurship, the networked agent, and the fear factor. *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*, 174, 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.techfore.2021.121281>
- Ahmed, S. (2024). The pillars of trustworthiness in qualitative research. *Journal of Medicine, Surgery, and Public Health*, 2, 1–4. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.glmedi.2024.100051>
- Akinboade, O. O. A., Taft, T., Weber, J. F., Manoko, O. B., & Molobi, V. S. (2023). How the social entrepreneurship business model designs in South Africa create value: A complex adaptive systems approach. *Journal of Entrepreneurship in Emerging Economies*, 15(1), 70–95. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JEEE-02-2021-0057>
- Ali, I., & Cottle, G. W. (2021). Reconceptualizing entrepreneurial performance: The creation and destruction of value from a stakeholder capabilities perspective. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 170(4), 781–796. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-019-04327-0>
- Alikhani, Z., & Shahriari, M. (2025). The effect of servant leadership on competitiveness of startups: The mediating role of entrepreneurial orientation and self-efficacy. *International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Innovation*, 26(2), 137–150. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14657503221134511>

- Bendickson, J. S., Stewart, G. T., Cowden, B., Lanier, P. A., & Johnson, S. I. (2025). Leading and managing inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystems. *Management Decision*. <https://doi.org/10.1108/MD-08-2023-1382>
- Bosse, D. A., Harrison, J. S., Pollack, J. M., & Schrempf-Stirling, J. (2023). Entrepreneurial opportunities as responsibility. *Entrepreneurship: Theory & Practice*, 47(1), 3–16. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10422587211069374>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2022). *Thematic analysis: A practical guide*. SAGE Publications.
- Burger, A., Kennedy, W., & Crooks, A. (2021). Organizing theories for disasters into a complex adaptive system framework. *Urban Science*, 5(3), 1–25. <https://doi.org/10.3390/urbansci5030061>
- Buys, T., Casteleijn, D., Heyns, T., & Untiedt, H. (2022). A reflexive lens on preparing and conducting semi-structured interviews with academic colleagues. *Qualitative Health Research*, 32(13), 2030–2039. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10497323221130832>
- Campbell, S., Greenwood, M., Prior, S., Shearer, T., Walkem, K., Young, S., Bywaters, D., & Walker, K. (2020). Purposive sampling: Complex or simple? Research case examples. *Journal of Research in Nursing*, 25(8), 652–661. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1744987120927206>
- Cao, Z., & Shi, X. (2020). A systematic literature review of entrepreneurial ecosystems in advanced and emerging economies. *Small Business Economics*, 57(1), 75–110. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11187-020-00326-y>

- Cavallo, A., Ghezzi, A., & Sanasi, S. (2021). Assessing entrepreneurial ecosystems through a strategic value network approach: Evidence from the San Francisco area. *Journal of Small Business and Enterprise Development*, 28(2), 261–276. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JSBED-05-2019-0148>
- Clark, D. N., Reboud, S., Toutain, O., Ballereau, V., & Mazzarol, T. (2021). Entrepreneurial education: An entrepreneurial ecosystem approach. *Journal of Management & Organization*, 27(4), 694–714. <https://doi.org/10.1017/jmo.2020.26>
- Cobern, W., & Adams, B. (2020). When interviewing: How many is enough? *International Journal of Assessment Tools in Education*, 7(1), 73–79. <https://doi.org/10.21449/ijate.693217>
- Coetzee, C. (2021). Simple rules and self-organisation: A complex systems' perspective on South Africa's COVID-19 response. *Jàmà Journal of Disaster Risk Studies*, 13(1), 1–4. <https://doi.org/10.4102/jamba.v13i1.1013>
- Crisp, R., Waite, D., Green, A., Hughes, C., Lupton, R., MacKinnon, D., & Pike, A. (2024). 'Beyond GDP' in cities: Assessing alternative approaches to urban economic development. *Urban Studies*, 61(7), 1209–1229. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00420980231187884>
- Dabić, M., Stojčić, N., Simić, M., Potocan, V., Slavković, M., & Nedelko, Z. (2021). Intellectual agility and innovation in micro and small businesses: The mediating role of entrepreneurial leadership. *Journal of Business Research*, 123, 683–695. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2020.10.013>

- Demirci, J. (2024). About research: Conducting better qualitative interviews. *Journal of Human Lactation*, 40(1), 21–24. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08903344231213651>
- DePoy, E., & Gitlin, L. (2019). *Introduction to research: Understanding and applying multiple strategies* [Electronic book]. Elsevier Health Sciences.
- Dewey, J. (1938). *Experience and education*. Macmillan Company.
- Donaldson, C. (2021). Culture in the entrepreneurial ecosystem: A conceptual framing. *International Entrepreneurship and Management Journal*, 17(1), 289–319. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11365-020-00692-9>
- Drucker, P. (1985). *Innovation and entrepreneurship*. HarperCollins Publishers, Inc.
- Eid, N., & Akella, D. (2024). Role of inclusive entrepreneurship educators: An actor network theory perspective. *Journal of Management Education*, 49(2), 168–203. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10525629241302495>
- Ekmekcioglu, E. B., & Öner, K. (2024). Servant leadership, innovative work behavior and innovative organizational culture: The mediating role of perceived organizational support. *European Journal of Management and Business Economics (EJM&BE)*, 33(3), 272–288. <https://doi.org/10.1108/EJM&BE-08-2022-0251>
- Elhami, A., & Khoshnevisan, B. (2022). Conducting an interview in qualitative research: The modus operandi. *MEXTESOL Journal*, 46(1), 1–7. https://mextesol.net/journal/index.php?page=journal&id_article=45957
- Farrugia, L. (2019). WASP (Write a scientific paper): The ongoing process of ethical decision-making in qualitative research: Ethical principles and their application to

the research process. *Early Human Development*, 133, 48–51.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.earlhumdev.2019.03.011>

Feld, B. (2020). *Startup communities: Building an entrepreneurial ecosystem in your city* (2nd ed.). John Wiley & Sons.

Feld, B., & Hathaway, I. (2020). *The startup community way: Evolving an entrepreneurial ecosystem*. John Wiley & Sons.

Fischer, D., Brettel, M., & Mauer, R. (2020). The three dimensions of sustainability: A delicate balancing act for entrepreneurs made more complex by stakeholder expectations. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 163(1), 87–106.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-018-4012-1>

Fona, C. (2024). Qualitative data analysis: Using thematic analysis. In *Researching and analysing business* (1st ed., pp. 130-145). Routledge.

<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003107774>

Frechtling, D., & Boo, S. (2012). On the ethics of management research: An exploratory investigation. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 106(2), 149–160.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-011-0986-7>

Freudenreich, B., Lüdeke-Freund, F., & Schaltegger, S. (2020). A stakeholder theory perspective on business models: Value creation for sustainability. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 166(1), 3–18. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-019-04112-z>

Fuentes, N., Schmutzler, J., & Vargas, A. M. (2024). Unpacking the multilayered nature of entrepreneurial ecosystems: A conceptual complex adaptive system model. *International Journal of Innovation Studies*, 8(4), 335–350.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijis.2024.08.001>

- Gaddefors, J., & Cunningham, J. (2024). Anatomy of a qualitative methods section: Embracing the researcher as an engaged author. *Entrepreneurship & Regional Development*, 36(5–6), 561–576. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08985626.2024.2315156>
- Greenleaf, R. (1970). *The servant as leader*. The Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership.
- Hai, T., & Van, Q. (2021). Servant leadership styles: A theoretical approach. *Emerging Science Journal*, 5(2), 245–256. <https://doi.org/10.28991/esj-2021-01273>
- Harima, A., Harima, J., & Freiling, J. (2024). Ecosystem orchestration: Unpacking the leadership capabilities of anchor organizations in nascent entrepreneurial ecosystems. *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice*, 48(6), 1404–1450. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10422587241241824>
- Hennink, M., & Kaiser, B. (2022). Sample sizes for saturation in qualitative research: A systematic review of empirical tests. *Social Science & Medicine*, 292, 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2021.114523>
- Invigorating entrepreneurial ecosystems: How bridging and buffering resource theories can help motivate entrepreneurialism. (2020). *Strategic Direction*, 36(3), 19–21. <https://doi.org/10.1108/SD-12-2019-0237>
- Iqbal, A., Nazir, T., & Ahmad, M. S. (2022). Entrepreneurial leadership and employee innovative behavior: An examination through multiple theoretical lenses. *European Journal of Innovation Management*, 25(1), 173–190. <https://doi.org/10.1108/EJIM-06-2020-0212>

- Jamieson, M. K., Govaart, G. H., & Pownall, M. (2023). Reflexivity in quantitative research: A rationale and beginner's guide. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 17(4), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1111/spc3.12735>
- Jones, J., & Donmoyer, R. (2021). Improving the trustworthiness/validity of interview data in qualitative nonprofit sector research: The formative influences timeline. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 50(4), 889–904. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0899764020977657>
- Karcher, K., McCuaig, J., & King-Hill, S. (2024). (Self-)reflection / reflexivity in sensitive, qualitative research: A scoping review. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 23, 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069241261860>
- Kauffman Indicators of Entrepreneurship. (2021). *Startup early survival rate indicator*. <https://indicators.kauffman.org/indicator/startup-early-survival-rate>
- Kazakov, R., Howick, S., & Morton, A. (2021). Managing complex adaptive systems: A resource/agent qualitative modelling perspective. *European Journal of Operational Research*, 290(1), 386–400. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ejor.2020.08.007>
- Lan, Y., Xia, Y., & Yang, L. (2021). Effects of servant leadership on the leader's innovative behavior. *Social Behavior and Personality: An International Journal*, 49(10), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.2224/sbp.10782>
- Lichtenstein, G., & Lyons, T. (2001). The entrepreneurial development system: Transforming business talent and community economies. *Economic Development Quarterly*, 15(1), 3–20. <https://doi.org/10.1177/089124240101500101>

- Lim, W. M. (2024). What is qualitative research? An overview and guidelines. *Australasian Marketing Journal*. OnlineFirst. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14413582241264619>
- Lin, Q., & Yi, L. (2023). Survival of the fittest: The multiple paths of entrepreneurial leadership driving adaptive innovation in uncertain environment. *European Journal of Innovation Management*, 26(4), 1150–1167. <https://doi.org/10.1108/EJIM-10-2021-0488>
- Lincoln, Y., & Guba, E. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Sage.
- Lizier, A. L., & Reich, A. (2021). Learning through work and structured learning and development systems in complex adaptive organisations: Ongoing disconnections. *Studies in Continuing Education*, 43(2), 261–276. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0158037X.2020.1814714>
- Lui, G., Yin, Q., & Zhang, L. (2022). Relations between entrepreneur's social identity and strategic entrepreneurship: Sustainable leadership as mediator. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, 1–25. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.903927>
- Marschlich, S., & Ingenhoff, D. (2021). Stakeholder engagement in a multicultural context: The contribution of (personal) relationship cultivation to social capital. *Public Relations Review*, 47(4), 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2021.102091>
- McGrath, C., Palmgren, P. J., & Liljedahl, M. (2019). Twelve tips for conducting qualitative research interviews. *Medical Teacher*, 41(9), 1002–1006. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0142159X.2018.1497149>

- McMullen, J. S., Brownell, K. M., & Adams, J. (2021). What makes an entrepreneurship study entrepreneurial? Toward a unified theory of entrepreneurial agency. *Entrepreneurship: Theory & Practice*, 45(5), 1197–1238.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1042258720922460>
- McSweeney, B. (2021). Fooling ourselves and others: Confirmation bias and the trustworthiness of qualitative research – Part 1 (the threats). *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, 34(5), 1063–1075.
<https://doi.org/10.1108/JOCM-04-2021-0117>
- Memon, M. A., Thurasamy, R., Ting, H., & Cheah, J.-H. (2024). Purposive sampling: A review and guidelines for quantitative research. *Journal of Applied Structural Equation Modelling*, 9(1), 1–23. [https://doi.org/10.47263/JASEM.9\(1\)01](https://doi.org/10.47263/JASEM.9(1)01)
- Mockler, R. (1968). The systems approach to business organization and decision making. *California Management Review*, 11(2), 53–58. <https://doi.org/10.2307/41164159>
- Moore, J. (1993). Predators and prey: A new ecology of competition. *Harvard Business Review*, 71(3), 75–86.
- Morgan, H. (2024). Using triangulation and crystallization to make qualitative studies trustworthy and rigorous. *The Qualitative Report*, 29(7), 1844–856.
<https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2024.6071>
- Mwita, K. (2022). Factors influencing data saturation in qualitative studies. *International Journal of Research in Business and Social Science*, 11(4), 414–420.
<https://doi.org/10.20525/ijrbs.v11i4.1776>
- Nave, E., Torres, P., Querido, A. R., Ferreira, J. J., & Fernandes, G. (2025).

Entrepreneurial ecosystems governance: critical perspectives and steps forward.

The Journal of Technology Transfer, 50(5), 2135–2230.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10961-024-10172-9>

Nicmanis, M. (2024). Reflexive content analysis: An approach to qualitative data analysis, reduction, and description. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 23, 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069241236603>

Northouse, P. (2021). *Leadership: Theory and practice*. Sage.

Pankov, S., Schneckenberg, D., & Velamuri, V. (2021). Advocating sustainability in entrepreneurial ecosystems: Micro-level practices of sharing ventures.

Technological Forecasting and Social Change, 166, 1–13.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.techfore.2021.120654>

Postula, A. (2024). Servant leadership: A discussion between managerial competencies and managerial values. *Studia i Materiały*, 2024(1(40)), 26–41.

<https://doi.org/10.7172/1733-9758.2024.40.2>

Ramanadhan, S., Revette, A. C., & Lee, R. M. (2021). Pragmatic approaches to analyzing qualitative data for implementation science: An introduction. *Implementation Science Communication*, 2(70), 1–10. [https://doi.org/10.1186/s43058-021-00174-](https://doi.org/10.1186/s43058-021-00174-1)

[1](https://doi.org/10.1186/s43058-021-00174-1)

Ramoglou, S., Zyglidopoulos, S., & Papadopoulou, F. (2023). Is there opportunity without stakeholders? A stakeholder theory critique and development of opportunity-actualization. *Entrepreneurship: Theory & Practice*, 47(1), 113–141.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/10422587211043354>

- Rapuano, V., & Valickas, A. (2023). A model for an organizational career development system applying the theoretical principles of complex adaptive systems. *Public Policy and Administration*, 22(4), 393–404. <https://doi.org/10.13165/VPA-23-22-4-01>
- Riaz, S., Morgan, D., & Kimberley, N. (2024). Using complex adaptive systems (CAS) framework to assess success factors that lead to successful organizational change: A new way to understand change implementation for success. *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, 37(6), 1295–1321. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JOCM-04-2023-0148>
- Roberts, R. E. (2020). Qualitative interview questions: Guidance for novice researchers. *The Qualitative Report*, 25(9), 3185–3203. <http://dx.doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2020.4640>
- Roundy, P. (2021). Leadership in startup communities: How incubator leaders develop a regional entrepreneurial ecosystem. *Journal of Management Development*, 40(3), 190–208. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JMD-10-2020-0320>
- Roundy, P., & Burke-Smalley, L. (2022). Leveraging entrepreneurial ecosystems as human resource systems: A theory of meta-organizational human resource management. *Human Resource Management Review*, 32(4), 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.hrmr.2021.100863>
- Roundy, P., & Evans, W. (2024). Entrepreneurial ecosystems as multiteam systems: Navigating independence and interdependence in the leadership of startup communities. *Journal of Business Venturing Insights*, 21, 1–8.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbvi.2023.e00445>

- Roundy, P. T., & Im, S. (2025). Combining cognition and context: Entrepreneurial alertness and the microfoundations of entrepreneurial ecosystems. *Asia Pacific Journal of Management*, 42(1), 57–75. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10490-024-09951-7>
- Roundy, P., Bradshaw, M., & Brockman, B. (2018). The emergence of entrepreneurial ecosystems: A complex adaptive systems approach. *Journal of Business Research*, 86, 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2018.01.032>
- Schaft, J., & Füller S. (2023). Supporting a vibrant entrepreneurial ecosystem: High density, critical mass, and effective strategies underpin the success of innovative life science ecosystems. *EMBO Reports*, 24(9), 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.15252/embr.202357798>
- Schlaile, M., Bogner, K., & Muelder, L. (2021). It's more than complicated! Using organizational memetics to capture the complexity of organizational culture. *Journal of Business Research*, 129, 801–812. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2019.09.035>
- Shi, Y., Zhai, G., Xu, L., Zhou, S., Lu, Y., Liu, H., & Huang, W. (2021). Assessment methods of urban system resilience: From the perspective of complex adaptive system theory. *Cities*, 112, 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2021.103141>
- Shoozan, A., & Mohamad, M. (2024). Application of interview protocol refinement framework in systematically developing and refining a semi-structured interview protocol. *SHS Web of Conferences*, 182, 1–12.

<https://doi.org/10.1051/shsconf/202418204006>

Silvestri, A., & Veltri, S. (2020). Exploring the relationships between corporate social responsibility, leadership, and sustainable entrepreneurship theories: A conceptual framework. *Corporate Social Responsibility & Environmental Management*, 27(2), 585–594. <https://doi.org/10.1002/csr.1822>

Solomon, S., Bendickson, J., Marvel, M., McDowell, W., & Mahto, R. (2021). Agency theory and entrepreneurship: A cross-country analysis. *Journal of Business Research*, 122, 466–476. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2020.09.003>

Soremekum, Y., Udeh, C., Oyegbade, I., Igwe, A., & Ofodile, O. (2025). Strategic conceptual framework for SME lending: Balancing risk mitigation and economic development. *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Growth Evaluation*, 05(01). 1056–1063.

<https://doi.org/10.54660/IJMRGE.2024.5.1.1056-1063>

Sullivan, L., Feeney, L., Crowley, R., Sukumar, P., McAuliffe, E., & Doran, P. (2021). An evaluation of the process of informed consent: Views from research participants and staff. *Trials*, 22(544), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13063-021-05493-1>

Tabas, A., Nätti, S., & Komulainen, H. (2023). Orchestrating in the entrepreneurial ecosystem: Orchestrator roles and role-specific capabilities in the regional health technology system. *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, 38(1), 223–234. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JBIM-05-2021-0257>

Taherdoost, H. (2022). What are different research approaches? Comprehensive review

of qualitative, quantitative, and mixed method research, their applications, types, and limitations. *Journal of Management Science & Engineering Research*, 5(1), 53–63. <https://doi.org/10.30564/jmser.v5i1.4538>

Tenny, S., Brannan, J. M., & Brannan, G. D. (2023). *Qualitative study*. StatPearls Publishing.

Tsui, A. S. (2021). Responsible research and responsible leadership studies. *Academy of Management Discoveries*, 7(2), 166–170. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amd.2019.0244>

Tuazon, G., Wolfgramm, R., & Whyte, K. (2021). Can you drink money? Integrating organizational perspective-taking and organizational resilience in a multi-level systems framework for sustainability leadership. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 168(3), 469–490. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-019-04219-3>

U.S. Department of Health & Human Services. (1979). The Belmont Report. *HHS.gov*. <https://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/regulations-and-policy/belmont-report/index.html>

Vedula, S., & Kim, P. (2019). Gimme shelter or fade away: The impact of regional entrepreneurial ecosystem quality on venture survival. *Industrial and Corporate Change*, 28(4), 827–854. <https://doi.org/10.1093/icc/dtz032>

Wahyuningsih, D. (2024). Innovations ability influenced by creativity, competence, and intrinsic motivation and its implications for entrepreneurs success. *Almana: Jurnal Manajemen Dan Bisnis*, 8(2), 206–218. <https://doi.org/10.36555/almana.v8i2.2474>

Walden University. (2024). *Institutional Review Board (IRB)*.

<https://academicguides.waldenu.edu/research-center/research-ethics>

Walden University Doctoral Capstone Resources. (n.d.). *Doctoral study rubric and research handbook*.

<https://academicguides.waldenu.edu/doctoralcapstoneresources/dba>

Xie, Z., Wang, X., Xie, L., & Duan, K. (2021). Entrepreneurial ecosystem and the quality and quantity of regional entrepreneurship: A configurational approach. *Journal of Business Research*, 128, 499–509. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2021.02.015>

Xu, L., Yang, S., Liu, Y., Newbert, S. L., & Boal, K. (2023). Seeing the forest and the trees: Exploring the impact of inter- and intra-entrepreneurial ecosystem embeddedness on new venture creation. *Academy of Management Journal*, 66(6), 1954–1982. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2021.0791>

Yang, J., & Zhang, M. (2022). Coopetition within the entrepreneurial ecosystem: Startups' entrepreneurial learning processes and their implications for new venture performance. *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, 37(9), 1867–1886. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JBIM-02-2021-0112>

Yin, R. (2018). *Case study research and applications: Design and methods* (6th ed.). SAGE Publications.

Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Leadership Strategies Used by Entrepreneurial Ecosystem Resource Providers to Support
Entrepreneurial Success

The purpose of this qualitative, multiple case project is to explore the strategies that some leaders within entrepreneurial ecosystem organizations use to collaborate in a manner that supports entrepreneurial success. The targeted population will consist of at least five entrepreneurial ecosystem organizations' leaders located in Midwest United States with successful experience in using strategies to collaborate in a manner that support entrepreneurial success. This project has the potential to add social change contributions because the collaboration of entrepreneurial ecosystem organizational leaders leads to a potential increase in entrepreneurial confidence, increasing the startup success rates and increasing community economic development. An increase in economic development opportunities may mean increased tax revenues used to make contributions within the community, such as improving parks, adding social programs, providing incentive programs for other entrepreneurs, and additional support for future entrepreneurs.

Interviewee: _____

Location: _____

Date: _____ Time: _____

Notes:

1. Greet interviewee and introduction.
2. Provide overview of the project and advise on the usefulness of the results.

3. Retrieve a signed consent form. Open floor for questions interviewee may have.
4. Remind interviewee that participation in the project is voluntary.
5. Remind interviewee data will be recorded and begin recording.
6. Begin interview by acknowledging interviewee by pre-assigned code name, date, time, and location.
7. Begin asking interview questions within the time given to allow interviewee time to respond.
8. Listen actively to interviewee. Ask follow-up and probing questions if necessary.
9. At the end of the interview, thank the interviewee for their time and participation.
10. Provide contact information to participant in the event they have questions after the interview.

Appendix B: Interview Questions

1. What strategies did you use to successfully collaborate in a manner that supports entrepreneurial success?
2. How did your employees respond to and implement those strategies?
3. How were the strategies to collaborate in a manner that supports entrepreneurial success communicated throughout your organization's stakeholders and the other agency partners within your area's entrepreneurial ecosystem?
4. What were the key barriers to implementing strategies used to collaborate in a manner that supports entrepreneurial success?
5. How did you overcome the key barriers to implementing strategies used to collaborate in a manner that supports entrepreneurial success?
6. What, if any, modifications did you apply to any strategy used to collaborate in a manner that supports entrepreneurial success?
7. What are the business processes your organization used within your community's entrepreneurial ecosystem to successfully collaborate in a manner that supports entrepreneurial success?
8. What else would you like to add about strategies you used within entrepreneurial ecosystem organizations to collaborate in a manner that supports entrepreneurial success?