INTRODUCTION

Distance education has evolved as a suitable and acceptable alternative to face-to-face instruction in the higher education classroom (Saba, 2005; Sener, 2010). The number of students in higher education taking a distance education course increased steadily since 2012, and in 2016, distance education was evidenced in over 30% of total enrollments. (Seaman, Allen, & Seamen, 2018) According to Seaman, Allen, and Seaman (2018), as of Fall 2016, 31.6% of all higher education students were enrolled in at least one distance education course or taking all coursework through a distance education program.

The desire to remain relevant and competitive plays a critical role in institutions adopting distance education as an instructional modality. Babson Survey Research Group conducts regional, national, and international research each year on distance education. Since 2003, Babson Survey Research Group has published an analysis of distance education enrollment trends, K-12 and higher education market demands, and institutional distance education practices. Seaman et. al (2018) reported that the number and variety of institutions offering online programs has increased every year since data collection began. The U.S. Department of Education began tracking distance education enrollment in 2012.

Allen and Seaman (2011) found that 65% of higher education senior leaders realized that in order to remain competitive, distance education needed to play a larger role in their institution’s overall strategic plan. Nworie (2012) explained that several factors have contributed to the rapid growth of distance education: the desire to fill a niche market; increased access to education, and competitive efforts to increase enrollment. Sener (2010) reported that a significant benefit of distance education is increased access to learning and degrees. Distance education’s place as an institutional strategy has increased and senior leadership’s appreciation of distance education’s value has moved distance education into the leadership conversation.

As a pedagogical approach, distance education has had a profound impact on higher education. The introduction of distance education was a disruptive change in the professional leadership experience of directors of distance education, and how leadership skills of directors of distance education were perceived by senior administration (Fredericksen, 2017). In addition to a lack of leader preparation, there is not a common credential or degree for those who lead distance education programs in higher education (Land & Bright, 2004; Ribble & Miller, 2013). Successful online programs do not just evolve on their own (Piña, 2016). Successful online programs require strategic planning by leaders. To maintain the continued and fast-paced growth in distance education, more research needs to be done on leadership of distance education in higher education (Fredericksen, 2017; Nworie, 2012; Nworie, Haughton, and Oprandi, 2012). Higher education has a need for leaders to exist in both the campus and online world (Beaudoin, 2003). A deeper understanding for institutions of the appropriate role of leaders of distance education is necessary forinstitutional success.

Research shows that distance education leadership is different from traditional leadership in higher education (Beaudoin, 2003; Nworie 2012). According to Nworie (2012), the unique leadership of distance education connects to the fact that distance education directors manage change across the institution that includes supporting traditional as well as adult students, empowering faculty to gain an understanding of sound online pedagogy, and supporting changing technologies. According to Miller (2014), the first generation of distance education directors spent the majority of their time as former faculty or instructional technologists and led from the periphery. As distance education increases, distance education directors need to lead from within the institution, and operate as a strategic partner with expertise. Little research has been done on the leadership of distance education. After a review of distance education literature, Beaudoin (2003) noted that nearly 70% of the distance education literature related to specific case studies based on educational theory, practice, and technology, and only a small segment of the research had to do with leadership of distance education. Beaudoin (2013; 2016) stressed the research on leadership of distance education had grown very little since his initial review (Beaudoin, 2003). Additional research focused on best practices for leadership of distance education is important for online instruction to be effective and online programs in higher education to be a successful.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Quality in distance education relates to institutional readiness. Calvert (2005) explained that the rapid evolution of distance education initially came at a cost to the online student. Zemsky and Massy (2004) argued the initial, staggered
progress of early distance education adoption was due to a rush to implement online learning before a dominant design format was tested. Zemsky and Massy argued that best practices in instructional design were not universally adopted for distance education. Early distance education programs were traditional face-to-face courses adapted for delivery on an institution’s online learning management system. Little progress was made in creating sound instruction to be delivered specifically online. (Zemsky & Massy, 2004) Beaudoin (2016) supported the idea that some institutions launched online programs too quickly and were fueled by the appetite to expand market share. Thus, many institutions skipped the planning phase (Beaudoin, 2016).

Portugal (2006) stressed that the nature of the distance education landscape requires a leader who is aware of the multiple characteristics and requirements of effective leadership. Portugal explained that institutional leaders of distance education must constantly be aware of changes in technology and emerging online academic markets (2006). Distance education leaders must adjust, evaluate, and assess the validity of online programs, content, and emerging technologies to remain competitive and viable in higher education. Beaudoin (2002) defined leadership in distance educations as “a set of attitudes and behaviors that create conditions for innovative change, that enable individuals and organizations to share a vision and move in its direction, and that contribute to the management of operational ideas” (p.132).

Nworie, Haughton, and Oprandi (2012) defined leading distance education as a new type of leadership in an old environment. Specifically, given its rapid growth, distance education leadership requires managing the difficult and complex change that displaces traditional educational systems (Nworie et. al 2012). Beaudoin (2003) stressed that within higher education, the leadership necessary in distance education is different from the leadership found in traditional classroom-based institutions. Holmberg (2005) argued the leadership differences are largely due to the fact that course design elevates in importance, faculty and staff roles change, and students experience increased control over their learning. Otte and Benke (2006) argued that a unique aspect of distance education leadership is that it requires expertise in curriculum development as well as instructional technology, training, and pedagogical process.

**METHODOLOGY**

The format of this study will be a collective case study and is a continuation of a pilot study on which I am working. A collective case study (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2018) methodology allows the stories and experiences of the participants to be collected through a bounded case and offers the potential to provide rich data for analysis of the research topic (Creswell, 2013). Interviews within a group of individuals who have experienced the same phenomenon will be conducted with directors of distance education at large, private, not-for-profit universities. As a group, the participants will all have experience leading change at similar institutions. A collected case approach allows the researcher to broaden the narrative of each participant by collecting interview information, field notes, and artifacts for analysis.

**FINDINGS**

In a pilot study of the same design the participants discussed the importance of being accessible and transparent with their team. These aspects came up numerous times in the interviews. The participants work at keeping the communication lines open with employees that report to them as well as followers across campus. The participants used the words “communication” and “transparent” numerous times. While there were a few similar themes in the interviews, the content of what each participant said was quite different. One participant expressed many aspects of Leader-Membership Exchange Theory. One could argue that his statements also connect with Path-Goal Theory. Some participants spent a lot of time meeting with employees as a group or one-on-one to go over action lists, discuss goals, and to be sure to discuss any hurdles in meeting those goals. Another participant discussed aspects of Adaptive Leadership Theory. He has brought about a lot of change in distance education at his institution. He discussed the Introduction of the Quality Matters course design process, working to reclassify certain work positions, and reducing the helpdesk ticket queue. Other themes that appeared during the coding process of the interviews included listening, mission, enthusiasm for sharing new vision, shared leadership, teamwork, birds of a feather, and interpersonal format. One participant discussed aspects that connect to Servant Leadership Theory. Her comments indicated a relational approach to leading in the organization.

**DISCUSSION**

As a pedagogical approach, distance education has had a profound impact on higher education. The introduction of distance education was a disruptive change in the professional leadership experience of directors of distance education, and how leadership skills of directors of distance education were perceived by senior administration (Fredericksen, 2017). Despite a lack of leader preparation, there is not a common credential or degree for those who lead distance education programs in higher education (Land & Bright, 2004; Ribble & Miller, 2013). Successful online programs do not just evolve on their own. (Piña, 2016) Successful online programs require strategic planning by leaders. To maintain the continued and fast-paced growth in distance education, more research needs to be done on leadership of distance education in higher education (Fredericksen, 2017; Nworie, 2012; Nworie, Haughton, and Oprandi, 2012). Higher education has a need for leaders to exist in both the campus and online
world (Beaudoin, 2003). A deeper understanding for institutions of the appropriate role of leaders of distance education is necessary for institutional success.

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