Leadership Challenges Facing Small Private Universities in the United States

Nidhi Aggarwal[1]

ABSTRACT

Financial and demographic factors and trends are coming together to create the perfect storm for higher education institutions. This paper briefly discusses these two factors and then addresses program evaluation strategies and elimination decisions as a cost-control mechanism.

1.   Introduction

Higher education faces a troubling future. For example, Woodhouse (2015) projected that the number of small college closures would triple in the following three years. Financial and demographic factors are coming together to create the perfect storm in higher education. The change in demographics, i.e., fewer high school graduates, creates uncertainty for small private universities with small endowments. The small private universities in the United States depend on three sources for their revenue: tuition, fees and grants, and distribution from their endowments. With shrinkage in all three revenue sources driven mainly by external economic factors, the small private universities face headwinds that may threaten their continued existence.

Advocates of outsourcing ventures see in them the combined virtues of government and private business. They argue that the government's oversight function and responsiveness to citizens' needs can be retained while taking advantage of private enterprises' ability to be more efficient, reduce costs, and maximize food production (Grover, Cheon, Teng, 1996).

Opponents, however, consider outsourcing a frightening prospect. They fear that universities/colleges will not be vigilant enough in monitoring companies' performance. In addition, they fear deterioration in the quality of service, corruption, and political patronage and that there would be no guaranteed reduced cost. Contractors can bid low to entice a public entity into a contract. Once the contract is signed and government releases its workforce and sells any required equipment, the contractor may, in the future, charge whatever price desired since the public entity could not readily resume the service (Burkholder, 2006).

The debate over outsourcing anywhere always creates a heated argument. Poole (1997) asserts that opponents of outsourcing use the most egregious examples they can find of fraud, corruption,

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[1] Virginia University of Lynchburg, School of Business & Professional Studies, Lynchburg, USA. Email: nidhiaggarwal2206@gmail.com

service failure, and public employee layoff to bolster their arguments. Poole maintains that often the cases are decades old. The problems cited could have been avoided if modem contracting techniques that emphasize outcome monitoring had been used or plans for reducing privatization's impact on public employees had been in place.

O'Leary and Egger (1993) claim that proponents of outsourcing use sample cases of leading cities or cite national survey results to support their contentions that privatization saves money, produces better service, and minimizes employees' livelihood. The historical "do it all in-house" philosophy has been replaced by "do only what you do best" in-house. This philosophy has resulted in virtual companies where nearly all functions are outsourced in extreme cases. Company management is limited to coordinating the activities of various subcontractors.

Benson (1999) notes that outsourcing, at its heart, exhibits a contradictory nature. The key to its elements is the high cost of getting into or out of a relationship; this necessitates a long-term agreement to amortize the costs. A long-term deal is claimed to be inherently inflexible. Nevertheless, flexibility is necessary to deal with changes because one cannot predict the future. This paradox, Benson claims, creates tension in the long-term relationship.

Outsourcing remains an area with a need for further research, specifically in cost-benefit analysis, impact on employee morale and productivity, and the social issues associated with privatization. In addition, public universities/colleges need to understand how outsourcing can benefit. For example, what reasons should drive districts to outsource any of their services? Can we learn from the experiences of the districts that have to outsource their services and have discontinued the service? Knowing the reasons for outsourcing and its success and failures could benefit any district that wishes to consider outsourcing a possibility.

This study is intended to provide data that would assist school university officials in making informed decisions about outsourcing non-educational services by supplying information as to advantages, concerns, and the future of outsourcing; factors that have previously influenced outsourcing decisions; satisfaction with those services that have been outsourced; the effects of selected employee issues on outsourced service units; which services were typically being outsourced at universities/colleges; and what cost savings were hoped to be achieved as a result of outsourcing.

1.1   Statement of problem

Will small private universities be able to survive in this critical time? And how can small private institutions, compared to public institutions, larger private institutions, or for-profit private institutions, deliver high-quality education to meet the diverse needs and high demands of American society over the next several decades? This is one of the most significant challenges for key leaders at small private institutions today. This study, therefore, will explore the key leaders' perceptions of the factors that make small private universities high quality, the vital role of leadership, and the effective leadership strategies. These strategies can promote high-quality education at small private universities in an ever-changing educational environment.

The privatization of higher education is a global phenomenon, and this study is an attempt to provide insights into the roles and contributions of small private universities in meeting the higher educational needs of American society, as well as the importance of effective leadership in promoting high-quality education at small private higher education institutions. This study will provide a valuable roadmap for those currently working or who want to pursue a higher education leadership and administration career.

1.2   Limitation of the study

This qualitative study intends to have results that are unique to this study, but it has not been the intent to generalize the findings to a larger population. As this study is limited to many Central Virginia private higher education institutions, the results may not be generalized to other private colleges and universities worldwide. In addition, the data in this study is subjective and may be biased as the participants were asked to share their perceptions and experiences and their perspectives and concerns. As a result, the data may not be completely accurate and cannot be generalized. This could be treated as

an exploratory study that should be replicated in the future with well-designed empirical research. The future data could be qualitative or quantitative.

2.   Literature review

Suleiman, Hansfi & Taslikhan (2017) studied the contribution of private universities in the Nigerian context. They used both quantitative as well as qualitative techniques for their research. First, they used secondary data to quantitatively evaluate the contribution of private universities to the Nigerian economy. They used structured interviews with private university staff to qualitatively assess the value of private university education in Nigeria. They found that private universities lead to growth in the enrollment of female students and the creation of new job opportunities for their graduates. The job opportunities came through offering new and innovative degree programs. Private universities do not have the bureaucratic red tape like their peers under government management. It takes less time for private universities to change their curriculum or offer new courses aligned with potential employers' requirements. They also acknowledge that private universities lack sufficient funds to build infrastructure and hire a quality workforce.

Brown (2011) points out that since the recession of 2008, small private universities have faced several challenges such as little to no return on endowments, reductions in philanthropic support, escalating overhead costs, competition for students, families in need of additional financial aid, and growing public concern regarding the value of higher education.

At least two financial factors can negatively affect higher education institutions (HEI) over the next ten years. The first is a debt-induced liquidity crisis, and the second is the effect of increased competition for students on revenue generation.

Bain (2012) identified a liquidity crisis in higher education. The Colleges and universities have taken on more debt causing a decrease in the equity ratio (equity as a percentage of assets) and an increase in the expense ratio (expenses as a percentage of revenue). In addition, many institutions have used debt financing to pay for improvements in and additions to physical facilities, hoping that more and better facilities would attract more students. However, this is a flawed strategy because, as discussed below, the pool of incoming students is shrinking and will continue to decline for many years. This may increase default risk in highly leveraged HEIs.

Debt creates financial risk and pressure because lenders expect HEI will make the required periodic interest payments and that they will eventually have the financial resources needed to liquidate the debt. As a percentage of the higher education cost base, debt increased by 11.7 percent, and interest expense increased by 9.2 percent from 2002 to 2008. Over the same period, instructional costs only increased by 4.8 percent. From 1995 to 2010, administrative and support costs and student services costs have grown as a percentage of the total institutional expenditures per full-time equivalent (FTE) student, while instructional costs have decreased (Bain, 2012).

The second source of financial pressure on private universities is competition from other sectors of the economy for funding. Public and private higher education rely on tuition for a significant part of their operating revenue, although in different degrees. Tuition made up about 21 percent of total revenue for public higher education in 2014-15, while it accounted for 35 percent of total revenue in private non-profit institutions. More than private institutions, public institutions rely on government grants, contracts, and appropriations. Public HEIs received about 44 percent of total revenue compared to only 13 percent in private non-profit institutions (IES, 2016).   However, public institutions must compete with Medicaid, corrections, public safety, and K-12 compulsory education for funding. The increasing percentages of state budgets allocated to these programs have caused public higher education's share of state budgets to dwindle (Fethke & Policano, 2012).

With flat student enrollment projected at least through 2025 and increasing costs, private universities are under pressure to control costs more than ever. This may lead institutions to question the viability of maintaining a catalog of traditional program offerings and consider the need to identify and eliminate programs and their associated costs. The decision to stop an academic program is difficult and painful; however, it is also a corrective market mechanism.

Most private universities must present a balanced annual budget, where expenditures are not greater than revenue. In periods of flat or declining student enrollment, the institution is faced with three choices: (1) increase revenue, (2) cut costs, or (3) increase cash inflow by borrowing. The first strategy is

hard to implement in increased competition and declining enrollment. Cost-cutting is painful, and so many financial administrators turn to the third option and either spend or borrow from endowment funds to cover current expenditures. While viable over a short period, this strategy is not a good long-term strategy and may harm future advancement (fundraising) efforts.

In a survey of 100 private university Presidents, concern about international pressure and the ability to prepare students to compete globally was demonstrated (Fischer, 2011). Ashburn (2011) pointed out that negative sentiment has arisen from recent media opinions about the value of higher education in several publications such as News Week, The New York Times, and The New Yorker. According to Fischer (2011), "Public anxiety over college costs is at an all-time high," and college presidents believe the "industry they lead is heading in the wrong direction" (p. 1). Studies have been conducted on higher education, particularly leadership, and what contributes to successful teaching and learning (Hamlin and Hungerford, 1989; Cowen, 1993; MacTaggert, 2007). In a study of 40 colleges and universities, MacTaggert examined predominantly private schools on the cusp of closure, bankruptcy, sanctions from the accrediting agencies, or decline in reputation or number of students (2007). He noted that the transformation of a distressed institution typically required a leader with qualities that included a combination of decisiveness and collaboration. New leadership was necessary to achieve an institutional turnaround among the institutions studied. Kotter (1990) suggests that leaders are facilitators rather than authoritarian and have interpersonal communication skills and creative thinking. Davis (2006) found that leaders foster continuous improvement and hold a vision of success for all to achieve. Leaders give a clear sense of direction (Benoit & Graham,2005); foster supportive environments for staff to engage in their research and teaching; treat academic staff fairly and with integrity, provide feedback on performance, are considerate (Ambrose et al., 2005); encourage open communication (Barge & Musambira, 1992); and act as a role model (Benoit & Graham,2005).

Crudo-Capili and Concepcion (2013) studied the characteristics of an effective leader of an academic organization from the perspectives of other educational leaders. They pointed out that influential leaders can establish a positive interpersonal relationship with the faculty and higher-level administrators and the aptitude and skill to utilize their experiences as teachers in addressing their unit's academic and pedagogical concerns. In addition, they suggested that influential leaders have dynamic relational skills: they have the strength of character to be sensitive to the social context of their work. Finally, they are gracious to realize that leadership is not an autonomous undertaking but a synergistic endeavor.

Erickson (2011) points out that academic leaders need to listen actively, delegate, and celebrate the contributions of people working for them. They also recommend that educational leaders be decisive in active and vocal dissension. They point out that it is not uncommon for leaders in academic settings to face intense and unwarranted criticism from the people they are trying to lead. Leaders need to embrace this instead of fighting it. It is also vital for the leaders to manage time efficiently, delegate effectively, articulate goals, network, drive performance, deal with the media, and lead strategically.

Duderstadt, Atkins & Houweling (2002) suggest that the leaders at small colleges and universities should approach issues and decisions concerning information technology as threats and new opportunities. There will be many challenges posed by emerging competitors in the for-profit sector or the potential loss of outstanding students and faculty members to institutions with superior technology infrastructures for teaching and research. So, too, will the status quo be threatened by a technology driving rapid, profound, and discontinuous change. Still, creative, visionary leaders at small private institutions will tap the energy created by such threats to lead their institutions in new directions that will reinforce and enhance their most important roles and values. They will use digital technology to help their students learn more effectively, help their faculty members become better teachers and scholars, and enable their institutions to perform more productively to serve a rapidly changing society better.

Karavedas (2019) suggests that successful higher education leaders intentionally broaden their professional network and design time and space for reflection. She also means that it is essential to interact regularly between senior leaders and emerging leaders. Finally, she recommends that higher education institutions hire a chief learning officer to grow institution-wide leadership skill development.

Owens, Call, and Vincent (2017) point out that academic settings are unique and complex. As per their empirical research of social work faculty, the educational leader needs to be transformational, and they also need to be honest, empathetic, and respectful of their stakeholders. They suggest that the

academic leaders should consider the extent to which the relationship values of the profession are taught in the leadership practices of the intellectual in their units. They point out that academic leaders with solid relational skills can facilitate conversations within the academic department that allow for more positive conflict resolution.

Wiley (2014) raised an interesting point that higher education has been in constant flux. The traditional binary model of transactional and transformational leadership may work well in this environment. However, he recommends a prudent approach to leadership and change management at all levels to navigate the uncertain terrain and respond to the changing context while taking care not to set unrealistic or unattainable goals.

The current literature review shows an acute shortage of quality research on outsourcing in private universities. The lack of quality research puts university administrators at a disadvantage in making well-informed decisions about the smooth functioning of their day-to-day operations.

The bottom line, it is the responsibility of academic leaders to build a high-performing institution. Developing a high-performing organization will require continuous reflective analysis of students, faculty, staff, and overall organizational productivity. It will require setting high-performing goals and an environment of mutual respect, understanding, and support. The leaders in high-performing organizations provide job security to their employees and opportunities for personal and professional growth. In their pursuit of high performance, they also need to balance their desire for higher quality with the cost-effectiveness of their organization. It is also essential to be consistent in their vision for the educational institute supplemented by competence, commitment, and dedication to organizational growth.

3.   Methodology

The study employed a qualitative design and methodology. In-depth interviews with five key leaders in various leadership positions at two non-profit small private universities in Central Virginia were conducted. The qualitative data-based design makes sense here because this area of research is still in the early stages of knowledge development. According to Yin (2015), since this sought to develop new knowledge and insights by asking "how" or "why," it was deemed appropriate to use a qualitative design. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews. The respondents were expected to meet a certain level of knowledge about the university.

With participant approval, the interviews were audio-recorded to ensure a complete transcript (Merriam, 1998; Rubin & Rubin, 1995). Typed notes were taken during all interviews, enabling the researcher to track key points to return to later in the interview and for use during data analysis. A semi-structured interview approach was used to carry on conversations that would elicit rich data that could be used in qualitative analysis (Lofland, 1971). Semi structured interviews give participants more room to answer in terms of what is important to them (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) and to control the introduction and flow of topics (Mishler, 1986). Although the interviews were semi structured in the early stages, they became more structured in the later stages of triangulation and member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Analysis occurred in three phases. First, interview transcripts were reviewed several times, searching for "recurring regularities" (Merriam, 1998, p. 180). The 15 researcher highlighted quotes and phrases from the interviews that were significant to the study. Using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), we went back and forth among transcripts until categories emerged that were consistent, yet distinct (Marshall & Rossman, 1989). The categories were named at this time, coded the transcripts, and placed sections in labeled folders representing each category (Bogdan & Biklin, 1982; Merriam, 1998). Second, we brought together the coded interviews and field notes and looked for relationships within and across the data sources. Third and final step involved integration and refinement of the categories until themes solidified (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

4.   Discussion of results

The first question for this research was, "what is the role of small private universities in higher education, and what the characteristics of a quality higher education institution are?" Both respondents agree that the small universities are mission-focused. It is easier for them to attract people who share

that mission, are passionate about it, and are committed. They do not just come for an eight-hour job and a paycheck; instead, they pour their heart into everything they do at work, and the students benefit from it. The small private school tends to be more flexible in decision making, which helps them be more innovative in exploring and developing new programs to counter the challenges of a shrinking and highly competitive private higher education marketplace. The quality of education comes from their focus on hands-on learning in and outside the classroom. One of the respondent universities measures high-impact practices on a semester-by-semester basis. These high-impact practices include participating in study abroad or domestic study away programs, conducting research with faculty, or completing an internship or field experience by graduation. The students who participate in high-impact practices are likely to complete their degree within three years. But these high-impact practices go beyond just graduating within three years. They prepare students in terms of knowledge, capabilities, and personal qualities, which will enable them to thrive and contribute to a fast-changing economy and turbulent, highly demanding global, societal, and often personal contexts. One of the respondents pointed out that private universities also differ in how students spend their educational time in college.

Small private universities spend their time equally between curricular and co-curricular activities. This distribution helps them develop intellectual powers and capacities and provides ethical and civic preparation, personal growth, and self-direction opportunities. In terms of their role, the respondents pointed out that they played a significant role and have made outstanding contributions to the States and the overall quality of higher education in the United States. They offer a substantial social and financial benefit to the State and locality they operate in. They pointed out that public universities will not be able to handle the demand for higher education by themselves. Therefore private universities play a crucial role in fulfilling the dreams and aspirations of new high school graduates. One of the universities has committed significant resources for a service-learning curriculum that provides their students an ability to interact with the environment and community in a tangible and ongoing way. They agreed that small private universities offer students a personalized learning environment that shapes their character and personalities and fosters creative learning. One major takeaway of these conversations was that it is undeniable that small private universities offer students an ideal learning environment with small class sizes and direct access to productive learning through individual quality instruction. They also foster a close relationship between professors and students. This bonding has a high impact on student learning and student life.

The second question for this research was about the critical attributes of the small university leaders and the challenges facing them in the current environment. Both respondents pointed out that the leader needs to lead by example. Leaders need to be role models for their faculty and staff and demonstrate how to be a partner in the institution's quest for quality education before they ask their team members to do the same. Another related quality is to be a servant leader. A successful leader has the authority and power to make big decisions or the knowledge and the talent to lead and commits to being a servant of the community. They must recognize that they are at the university to serve and be humble about it. They should listen to what other people attempt to do to make the university a better place to educate students. Both respondents agreed that financial challenge is the most critical challenge to non-profit, small private universities in promoting a comprehensive liberal arts quality education. Small private universities have small endowments and restricted funds, and revenues mainly come from tuition and alumni support. The cost of private universities is expensive because their limited funds cannot provide significantly for their operation, and it is difficult for parents to pay for these ever-increasing costs. Therefore, keeping education affordable to parents and students is a critical challenge for small private higher education institutions, especially in the current economic crisis. One leader pointed out that their institution is 92% tuition-dependent and a slight change in enrollment has a significant impact on their day-to-day operations. The budget of these small universities is solely based on the fixed cost of employee payroll. Therefore, it is not easy to be agile in turbulent times. As with the declining revenue, the demand for accreditation requirements is getting more demanding and costly to provide all of the services that the accrediting bodies say that universities should have, such as career counseling, health services, and many other services that a university must provide. It raises the cost, making it even more challenging to compete with other universities. There are also growing demands for technology which require more frequent and expensive upgrades in the university's IT infrastructure. Because of the limitation of financial resources, small private universities are facing a critical challenge in attracting,

hiring, and retaining quality faculty who are not only interested in doing research but also are dedicated teachers. Sometimes a more prominent university can steal them up because they can offer a bigger salary and better benefits. Another challenge facing small private universities is to be able to maintain high student enrollment, retention, and graduation rates.

The third question for this research was about the critical effective leadership strategies used to maintain and promote high-quality education in their respective university. Both universities have a five-year strategic plan developed with input from all the stakeholders such as faculty, staff, alumni, donors, and current and potential students. This planning process involves scanning the environment for strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. They use this plan to balance and maintain a realistic budget and manage stable finances, identified as a strong foundation for the school's development. They have to ensure that the financial priorities match the strategic plan. The goals such as enrollment, fundraising, and retention are documented in matrices or tables for the results. To keep themselves financially viable, they are always looking for new donors who can contribute significant amounts towards the unrestricted endowment. They also conduct financial viability of new as well as existing programs. For example, one school borrowed money to kick-start new health science programs such as Doctor of Physical Therapy (DPT), Physician Assistive Medicine (PA), and Doctor of Medical Sciences (DMSc), which are now paying back handsomely towards their financial stability. They are also working hard to improve student satisfaction while in school.   It requires an understanding that accuracy, efficiency, timeliness, and attitude are essential. People are serving in the areas of student services, whether they be academic or other student services, see themselves as there for service, and not simply to fulfill their objectives of doing just a task. The student is seen as a customer, as a client, like the one for whom we exist and that we serve. This helps with student retention and future loyal alumni donors for the university.

To boost student enrollment, they are working on new branding strategies, including image and awareness for the university. In addition, they encourage current students, faculty, and staff to be active on their social media accounts by liking, sharing, commenting, and sending stories to the communication department to help provide the content for videos, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube. The ultimate goal of this exercise is to amplify the efforts to elevate their university nationally and hopefully globally. Last but not least, one of the respondents mentioned that every school needs to maintain an effective assessment system to evaluate the university's performance regularly.

The fourth question for this research was about any other issues considered when studying quality enhancement at small private universities. Both respondents said that the interview was quite comprehensive, and they have provided all the information they have found necessary.

5.   Conclusions

The findings of this study reinforce the importance of effective leadership in transforming, promoting, and enriching the quality of education at small private institutions. The small private university leaders face the challenge of leading their institutions with a modest endowment and limited funds and resources. Yet, these leaders are passionate about their mission of providing quality education to all students at an affordable cost. These universities play a crucial role in relieving pressure off the state universities by providing additional seats for aspiring college-bound high school graduates.

The private universities will need to do serious restructuring to align themselves with the need of the students from the millennial generation. However, with the improvement in the program offerings and increase in the quality of in-class educational experience, they will be in an excellent position to respond to the changing trends. One of those trends will be integrating technology into teaching and learning. Another trend will be the growth in the non-traditional adult student population, requiring more online offerings or online classes.

Faculty is the heart of any academic enterprise. The small private universities will need to attract, hire, and retain outstanding faculty. The teaching, mentoring, and interaction by these faculty members make the university a special place for students for the rest of their lives. One of the most distinguishing characteristics of small private higher education institutions is creating a personalized learning environment that provides students direct access to learning opportunities and experiences. The informal interpersonal relationships between students and faculty have substantially impacted a student's learning and have changed students' lives.

With small and selective universities such as Sweet Briar College and Hampshire College on the brink of going under, these are challenging times in higher education, especially for small private liberal arts colleges/universities. The academic leaders need to clearly articulate the value of a transformative private education, which develops graduates who will take us into the future with selfless and vigilant leadership. The future of these academic institution will depend on university administrator being able to make tough decision to reduce expenses and increase revenue in short as well as long term.

6.   Recommendations and Implications

Most small private universities will face significant challenges in the coming years due to demographic shifts, an inability to grow net revenue, and a growing demand for more prominent and urban colleges. To counter these challenges, small private universities need to operate a principle of "triple-A": Agility, Adaptability, and Alignment. With agility, they will be able to respond to changes in demand and supply of their academic programs quickly. With adaptability, they will be able to adjust curriculums to accommodate market changes. And with alignment, the educational administration should provide incentives to faculty and staff to improve the performance of their academic unit. These three components, agility, adaptability, and alignment, will offer sustainable competitive advantages for the university.

The findings from this study showed that the most critical challenge to small private universities is the financial challenge. Therefore, it is recommended that small private institutions should have action plans with practical strategies in marketing the university, developing long-term investment, and increasing revenue sources for the institution's operations. This study was limited in terms of scope and size. Future studies should expand the sample to include a large number of private universities and should collect quantitative data.

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Appendix 1
Interview Questions

1. What are the roles and contributions of non-profit, small private colleges and universities? What are the characteristics of a high-quality small private university, in your view? Could you please share your perceptions of the factors that make small private universities high quality?

2. What critical challenges do small private universities (or your school) face in promoting a high-quality education?

3. What effective leadership strategies have you used to maintain and promote high-quality education in your university?

4. Are there other issues considered when studying quality enhancement at small private universities?