Enabling Online Initiatives: The Role of Teaching and Learning Center Leaders at Small, Private Colleges

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Abstract

As online learning continues to grow and became an integral component of many higher education institutions, the role of leadership in guiding those online learning initiatives differs from institution to institution. This paper explores the experiences of leaders in centers for teaching and learning who have a role in online learning leadership at small, private colleges. With online learning being just one of my many roles for leaders, a phenomenological study was used to fully understand the perceptions of leaders in leading online initiatives. Findings from the voices of those leaders can inform approaches for other leaders in online learning.

Introduction

The development of centers for teaching and learning (CTLs) and their relevance to institutions of higher learning has led to extensive explorations in the area of faculty development, which has been one of the main charges and focus of CTLs since their inception (Hubball, Lamberson, & Kindler, 2012; Tassoni, 2009; Tiberius, 2002). As higher education institutions grapple with an array of issues and external factors that extend beyond the classroom experience and the traditional domain of teaching and learning, the role of CTLs within higher education organizations have transformed to a centerpiece for initiating change and advancing organizational learning (Lieberman, 2005). Online learning is one such area of expansion, with online programs being more broadly adopted in order to increase enrollment, extend institutional prominence, and also to meet a growing learner demand for online offerings (Allen & Seaman, 2017). The expansion of these offerings places pressure on administrators as well as faculty to develop online programs (Esterhuizen, Blignaut, & Ellis, 2013; Lin, Singer, & Ha, 2010).

At small, private colleges and universities, the formation of online learning initiatives is largely still in the early stages of formation (Clinefelter & Magda, 2013). Clinefelter and Magda (2013) reported that administration of online learning initiatives at independent colleges and universities is largely decentralized with 78 percent of respondent institutions reporting that responsibilities are spread across several departments. CTL units were identified as one of the departments that has a role in online learning initiatives, particularly in curriculum design, technology integration, faculty development, and other support activities (Clinefelter & Magda, 2013; Legon & Garrett, 2017). Due to the rapid changes brought about by online learning, these locales provide a unique vantage point from which to explore the role of CTLs and the leadership approaches of CTL leaders as they take on new roles, such as online learning.

CTLs most often are situated within a hierarchical structure where CTL leaders report directly to either the provost or one level below the provost (Ambrose, 1995; Nemko & Simpson, 1991; Sorcinelli, 1988). As a result, CTL leaders have some measure of authority from an administrative and organizational perspective. Despite this positioning, Sorcinelli (2002), emphasized that CTL leadership relies heavily on rapport-building with faculty and expresses itself in informal, non-hierarchical leadership. While the structure and presence of a CTL as an academic unit is valuable, Sorcinelli (2002) emphasized that it has been the informal leadership that CTL leaders provide that fosters faculty buy-in. Faculty seek connections with a person, not an academic unit, and therefore CTL leaders must be both visible and available (Sorcinelli, 2002). In previous examinations of CTL structures, researchers emphasized the unique role that CTL leaders have in the success of their unit, however the role of CTL leaders on specific initiatives has not been explored. Moreover, the forms of leadership employed by CTL leaders or even the self-perceived role of CTL leaders in leading institutional initiatives is a gap in the literature.

In light of this model of governance and the role that CTL leaders can potentially have in online learning leadership, the research study described in this paper sought to explore the perceptions of CTL leaders engaged in online learning initiatives within small independent colleges and universities in the Southeastern region. CTL leaders were targeted at institutions that are identified as small, non-profit, 4-year colleges and universities within the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education. The study described in this article was based on interviews with

CTL leaders at target institutions who oversaw online learning initiatives as part of their duties. The research design used complexity leadership theory (Uhl-Bien, Marion, & McKelvey, 2007) as a guiding framework and sought to answer the research question: what perceived leadership roles do CTL leaders have that align with the three leadership functions of complexity leadership theory (administrative, adaptive, and enabling leadership)?

Theoretical Framework

As individuals seek solutions and implement change, their actions affect the behavior of others within the organization and elicit additional responses and change due to the interdependent nature of the organization. Complexity leadership theory recognizes that within organizational structures there exists three forms of leadership at work: 1) formal, hierarchical, administrative leadership, 2) informal and emerging adaptive leadership, and 3) enabling leadership. Together these have allowed administrative and adaptive leadership forms to function together (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007).

Table 1

The Three Leadership Functions of Complexity Leadership Theory

Leadership Function	Description
Administrative Leadership	• Individuals and groups in formal managerial roles plan and coordinate activities to accomplish organizationally-prescribed outcomes in an efficient and effective manner • Focuses on alignment and control • Represented by hierarchical and bureaucratic functions of organization
Adaptive Leadership	• Adaptive, creative, learning actions that emerge from the actions of multiple agents in an organization • Informal emergent dynamic that occurs among interactive agents • Not an act of authority
Enabling Leadership	• Catalyzes optimal conditions for adaptive leadership • Manages *entanglement* between bureaucratic (administrative) and emergent (adaptive) forms of leadership

Note. Adapted from Uhl-Bien, Marion, & McCelvey (2007).

To place these functions of leadership into a visual diagram to reflect the interplay of the various functions, we can see in the diagram (see Figure 1) that enabling leadership serves as the means to manage entanglement (Uhl-Bien, Marion & McCelvey, 2007) and serve as a mediator between the bureaucratic forms of leadership found in administrative leadership and the informal, emergent forms of leadership found in adaptive leadership.

Figure 1. Theoretical framework diagram based on the three leadership functions of complexity leadership theory (Uhl-Bien, Marion, & McKelvey, 2007).

To explore the role of CTL leaders as they lead online learning initiatives, the three leadership functions of complexity leadership theory were used as a conceptual framework. In this conceptual framework (see Figure 2), CTL leaders and their various roles are situated within the three functions of complexity leadership theory.
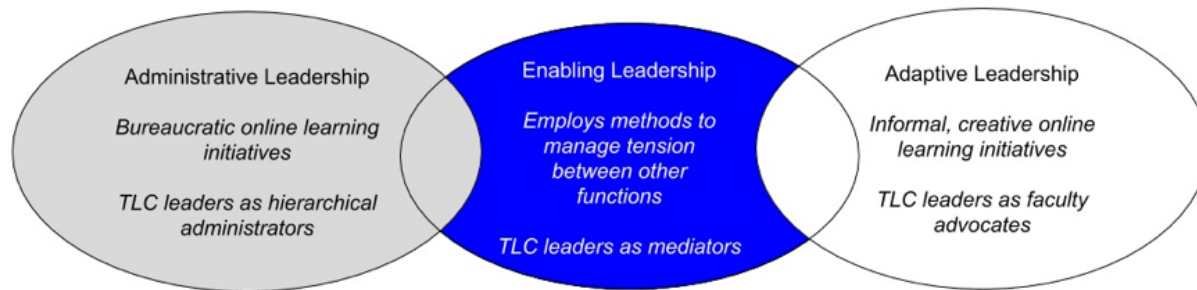
Figure 2. Conceptual framework based on the three leadership functions of complexity leadership theory (Uhl-Bien, Marion, & McKelvey, 2007).

CTL leaders have a distinct organizational role with expectations coming from their supervisors and so serve in administrative leadership within a hierarchical role. On the adaptive leadership role, CTL leaders have a rapport relationship with faculty and serve as advocators for their teaching and learning experiences. Between the roles of administrative and adaptive functions, CTL leaders employ both approaches and utilize enabling leadership practices to mediate the balance between the administrative and adaptive leadership functions. Enabling leadership overlaps with the other functions of leadership indicating that enabling leadership can be utilized as a means of reducing tension and allowing CTL leaders to navigate between the other two leadership functions. In order to effect change in online learning initiatives, it was assumed prior to the study that CTL leaders must employ all forms of leadership given in the conceptual framework and within complexity leadership theory.

Process

The research study sought to explore the perceptions and experiences of CTL leaders as they relate to their influence and leadership in online learning at their institution. In considering my own research epistemology, the research questions, and the theoretical framework, a transcendental phenomenological methodology (Merriam, 2009; Moustakas, 1994) was selected to inform and guide the study design. Within transcendental phenomenology, researchers set aside all preconceived ideas related to the study to observe phenomena through an unbiased view (Moustakas, 1994). As a former CTL leader, I have observed the constraints of serving in an administrative position while also building faculty rapport and therefore have preconceived notions related to the topic that was explored. Due to these close connections to the topic, transcendental phenomenology was selected as a valuable methodology for removing inherent biases that I have associated with the topic.

Participants

To find CTL leaders who were involved in both traditional CTL roles as well as online learning, the directory information of independent college and university organizations was utilized in order to ensure all universities were considered. The independent councils for Tennessee, Georgia, South Carolina, and North Carolina were used to form the participant group. Using institutional directory and website information, a total of 15 institutions met the criteria of the purposeful sample, meeting the Carnegie classifications, having distinct online programs and courses, and having oversight of these efforts situated within the CTL. An initial sample size of participants was sought based on the recommendations of Morse (1994) and Kuzel (1992), who suggest that six to eight participants for phenomenological studies would yield a homogenous sample (Guest et al., 2006). An initial email communication was sent to 21 CTL leaders, classified as directors and associate directors at the 15 institutions, anticipating that not all CTL leaders would respond or participate in the study. A total of seven participants participated in this study from those who responded to the initial email. Six of these participants served as the primary CTL leader on the campus. In order for participants to share their lived experiences without concern for their own confidentiality or that of their associated institutions, pseudonyms were used for participants and institutions were not mentioned by name (Kaiser, 2009).

Alex. Alex recently joined their role as the director of their institution's CTL, previously serving in a different unit on the campus. Alex also served previously in a faculty role at their current institution. The interviews with Alex took place during their first academic term in their role.

Colleen. Colleen had a background as a faculty member and served as the director of their institution's CTL. Their position was a grant-funded position that was ending its funding cycle during the research interviews. Colleen had

been at the institution for the length of the grant and prior to their involvement, the institution did not have a CTL unit.

Jesse. Jesse reported to the director of a CTL who also participated in the research study, Peggy. In their role as an instructional designer, Jesse was involved in the institution's online learning initiatives and regularly working with faculty in this area. Their work background was in information technology and prior to their instructional design position, they had worked in the institution's information technology office.

Leslie. Leslie served as both the director of the institutional CTL while also retaining faculty status and a regular teaching load. During the interviews, Leslie also had recently stepped into a role as head of the information technology unit, while retaining the job roles of the CTL director. The CTL at their institution was a faculty appointment that was guided by a faculty development committee.

Misha. Misha was a newly appointed leader in online learning and technology initiatives in their office, which did not exist prior to their appointment and was still an office of one. They had worked in corporate information technology positions prior to starting the position as a CTL leader at their institution. They were crafting policy and processes that did not exist as a result of the newly created position.

Peggy. Peggy served as their institution's director of the CTL unit. Prior to their current position, they were in a K-12 position, working in a school district office. In addition to providing their insights in the research study, Peggy also supervised another participant, Jesse.

Trisha. Trisha served as the director of their institution's CTL and had recently started this position, moving from a different institution. They had served in CTL units at three distinct institutions. Prior to their administrative work in a CTL, they had served in a faculty role and continued to be actively involved in the classroom.

Data Collection and Analysis

The instruments used in this study reflected the transcendental phenomenological methodology with the data collection method being interviews (Merriam, 2009). Semi-structured interviews were utilized to collect data with open-ended questions that could be readily adapted to allow for new knowledge derived from the *essence* of participant experiences to be incorporated into the interviews (Moustakas, 1994). Interview questions also aligned with complexity leadership theory with specific questions written to address the three functions of leadership in each interview protocol (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007).

The procedure for the research followed the guiding principles of transcendental phenomenology using a process of epoché during the data collection process, followed by reduction, imaginative variation, and synthesis (see Figure 3) using transcendental methodology and the modified Van Kaam method (Moustakas, 1994). The process, with analysis taking place during the data collection period, allowed for iterative reflection to take place in both the interview questions and data collection procedures, but also in the analysis of the data itself as more voices were incorporated into the research study.
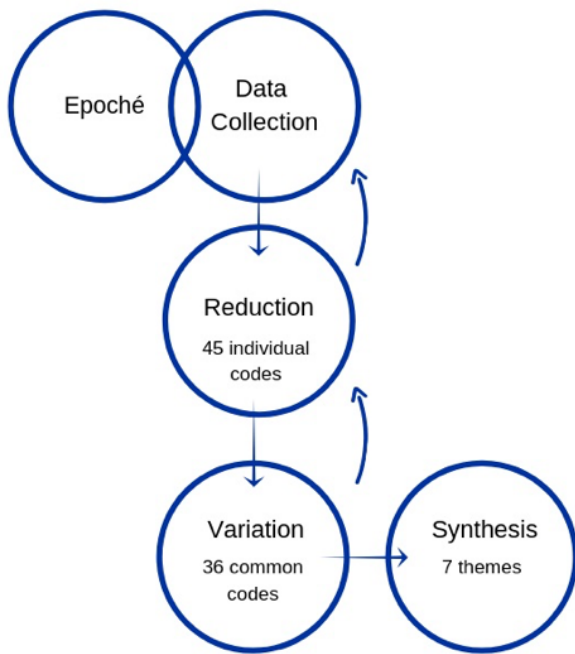
Figure 3. Flowchart of the data collection and analysis process.

The process allowed for the researcher to set aside their biases during the data collection period (epoché) and then analyze data as it emerged through the interviews. This was accomplished by evaluating transcripts shortly after conducting interviews and using an inductive process in coding the data (Merriam, 2009). Evaluation at this period allowed for the researcher to also approach the phenomenon shortly after identifying internal biases and also to follow-up with participants in subsequent interviews for greater understanding and clarification. This process of reduction produced 45 individual codes which were then analyzed and evaluated collectively using a process of *imaginative variation*, which identified elements unique to all participants. Lastly, a synthesis of these common experiences coded in the data created seven distinct themes. While the themes were derived in an inductive manner, the nature of the questions allowed for the themes to center around addressing the research questions and ultimately the leadership functions of complexity leadership theory.

In total, there were seven major themes with two of the major themes having three distinct sub-themes each. These themes were found consistently in participant interviews and are grouped based on their relation to the research questions, which, in turn reflects the three leadership functions of complexity leadership theory: 1) administrative leadership, 2) adaptive leadership, and 3) enabling leadership. The themes are displayed (see Figure 4)to reference the nature of complexity leadership theory with two functions of leadership, administrative and adaptive, and a third function that enables balance between the other two functions.
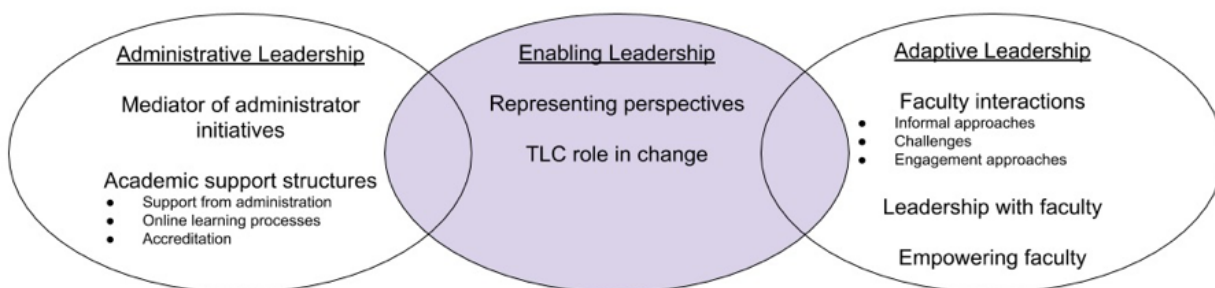

Figure 4. Themes and sub-themes from the research study based on the three leadership functions of Complexity Leadership Theory.

Administrative Role in Online Learning Initiatives

Participants in the research study identified their work as being deeply involved in the initiatives related to online learning and instructional technology. A clear administrative role in online learning initiatives was a criterion for participants and yet participants, when asked about the catalyst for online learning initiatives, gave mixed answers on who owns those initiatives administratively. All participants identified administrative leadership of online learning initiatives as coming from outside their unit. In some cases, administrative leadership came directly from the president (42%), from the provost or an academic council (28%) or was driven by a mix of these elements and including other units such as marketing (28%).

Participants acknowledged they played an administrative role in online learning initiatives, but to a larger degree they see themselves as mediator of directives from other administration units. Leslie, in speaking to the methods of communication that may help faculty be aware of methods for improving teaching, stated "I'm sort of behind the scenes facilitating [initiatives] or promoting an administrative agenda that I agree with." Other participants felt their role served to deliver administrative initiatives in ways that faculty could process or they were equipping faculty with tools needed to meet initiative aims. Peggy, in speaking to a new online learning initiative mandated across the institution, shared:

> I feel like I'm kind of like the soft mattress that's on top of the box spring. I know it's mandated. I know what's required, but the way I deliver it has to allow the faculty to feel as if they have buy-in and they're contributing to the decision making.

Faculty buy-in was an oft-mentioned phrase amongst participants, and Trisha noted the phrase "buy-in" came up regularly as a significant priority in planning initiatives and workshops for faculty and as a priority for to communicate with faculty. In reflecting on this approach, Trisha stated:

> I think I try to strike a middle ground generally, and certainly I'll try to understand each perspective. They commonly are contrasting perspectives. I'll absolutely try and put myself in the shoes of each kind of party, try to advocate for an approach that will satisfy at least some of the needs of each party. Often, support and move forward the priorities and interests from an administrative perspective, but in language or in a manner that I feel will go over better with faculty. I think, really, that's one of the key functions of a faculty developer is to figure out how to advance those institutional priorities in a way that you might be successful with your faculty customers.

In two instances shared by separate participants, there was also the need to reach out to administrative leaders on campus to discuss faculty perceptions of certain initiatives and to help clarify the faculty perspective. In both cases, the participants felt faculty did not have a correct perception of the initiative but felt the need to share that perspective with trusted administrative contacts so that the messaging surrounding the initiatives could be more clearly communicated.

Adaptive Role in Online Learning Initiatives

In the literature examining CTLs, there was an emphasis on the impact of rapport building and informal approaches to faculty development. In applying this concept within complexity leadership theory there was close alignment with the definition of adaptive leadership, which relies on creative, informal, and non-hierarchical approaches to affecting change (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). Descriptions of faculty interactions revealed that all participants were particularly adept in navigating the environment to accomplish their goals and work in collaboration with faculty to affect change.

Most participants expressed ideas for how to continually engage faculty in unique ways regardless of these challenges and perceived addressing faculty needs in online learning as within the scope of their role. Jesse shared a strategy for engaging with faculty who may be approaching online learning at the insistence of their chair or dean.

> Obviously, those who are eager to learn were easy, easy to work with. Those who we're not so eager to work with us. I tried to approach it in the way of just trying to show them the benefit of the things. Like how can this help you? How could it make your life easier? Because in large part I think that their mindset was, well, I already know what I'm doing, what I do works, the way I do it works, and so they were just hesitant to change. And so I always tried to approach it, I'm trying to give them examples of how this could really help and asking them questions about, you know, is there anything that you would like to do better or what are some of your challenges? And then kind of approaching it that way.

Peggy also adopted the approach of showing the benefits of working with the CTL and how it would assist in the workload and effort of faculty:

> That's what we're going to do in [our] office and all we can do is: do it, showcase it and encourage anyone else who wants to do it to do it as well. So I think you have to start first and demonstrate what you're trying to accomplish and then once you're able to do that, I think that people can make an informed decision about whether or not this is something that they want to do or not. But it does save time and it saves energy.

The method of interacting with faculty was usually adaptive to the needs of the faculty member as well, even if it was not the most efficient in terms of time or scope. For example, Leslie stated:

> I really think the one on one, which is of course that's labor intensive, but if you can meet with people one on one, because then they are not embarrassed in front of other people. They get a chance to ask all their questions.

Personal and adaptive approaches were acknowledged by several participants and responsiveness was also a key element of these approaches. Leslie in sharing what about what makes for effective faculty approaches stated:

> So that, I think, is the one on one and being able to respond to faculty when they need it. There's this thing in teaching called just-in-time teaching, which is, you know, giving students what they need when they need it. And it's really true with faculty, when they need it is when you really need to respond. That can be challenging because like our students, they often wait until the last minute. You know, like the week before classes is suddenly when everyone needs Blackboard help, when they've had kind of all summer where they could have been asking for help but haven't. Things like that. If I can do it, I'll help them. Because you have to - because you've got to help the willing. You've got to work with the people who are willing to learn, when they're willing to learn it and if you are mean about it or snarky about it, then they're not going to be willing to work again, work with you again. And I've read articles or blog posts or whatever about how to do technology training and pretty much all of them say the same thing: Start with the willing. Start with the core of the willing and interested and work from there.

These approaches with faculty reflect both an awareness of effective means for reaching their target audience while also grappling with their greater institutional role as leaders of institutional change.

Enabling Role in Online Learning Initiatives

Complexity leadership theory, in addition to articulating administrative and adaptive leadership functions, recognizes that there exists a third form of leadership that balances the tensions between these other two leadership functions (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). Enabling leadership allows for adaptive leadership to be engaged and optimized within an administrative structure and helps leaders navigate the entanglements that come from these differing functions of leadership. In exploring the perceptions of CTL leaders as they implement online learning initiatives, this research study also sought to explore what tensions exist, if any, between the CTL leader's roles of faculty advocate and administrative staff. Participants did acknowledge that there were such tensions found within their role.

> In discussing the administrative role of CTL leaders previously, it was clear from participant responses that they did not perceive themselves as playing a prescriptive administrative role when it came to their institutions' online learning initiatives. However, participants did perceive of themselves as mediators of administrative initiatives. Closely associated with this role, but outside of the function of administrative leadership, CTL leaders in this study emphasized the importance of representing faculty perspectives and their voice. Likewise, it was important to represent administrative perspectives to faculty in ways that encouraged faculty buy-in as discussed in the section on mediator of academic initiatives. The tension between these two roles was acknowledged, but participants also employed strategies for navigating the role.

Alex, in describing the perception of online learning initiatives from traditional faculty and their online unit, shared:

I try, you know, and I, I look at it from all perspectives and you know, I can understand where the quote traditional faculty may get, you know, get some things misconstrued and think one thing and I can see where the other college is coming from. And so, trying to be that voice of reason in the middle and working with both sides.

Understanding the administrative aims and also the concerns of faculty was a key function of the participants. Trisha in describing what their role looked like acknowledged this important function of her role as CTL leader:

Those of us who have the luxury of spending all of our time on some variation of faculty development, I think we just lose sight of who our customers are. We just think that oh, of course. Of course, like the LMS is going to be the critical thing for any course regardless of modality. Of course. Wait a minute. That's just going to be perceived as extra work by the faculty member, right? So then if we want them to do this, how do we message it? How do we present it in a way that's going to get more of them responding positively? So I think that would end up being one of my recurring roles here, is trying to speak from the mindset of an average faculty member. Not to be resistant myself, but to help us understand how we can get our message across to that group more effectively.

Trisha continued that for a particular online learning initiative they had to intervene by speaking up on behalf of faculty. In this particular case, the steps proposed by administrators were, in Trisha's mind, disconnected from what they knew would be the reaction faculty would have upon hearing such decisions:

A lot of what I said was designed to help my colleagues understand the mindset of a faculty member who may be resistant or might be inclined to have a negative reaction to what was being proposed.

CTL leaders also recognized that there was an inherent tension as faculty were inclined to be suspicious of administrative directives. Leslie shared:

Sometimes, you know, the truth is if people know it's coming from administration, they're just going to reject it because it's coming from administration. Or just be a little more suspicious or reactive. It's just, it's just the nature of the beast. I mean it's the same everywhere.

Jesse also shared that there was some danger of the CTL being perceived as affiliated more closely with the institution's non-teaching administrative core, and how important it was to clearly communicate their role as supporter for faculty:

I felt like [faculty perception] was kind of split right down the middle. Like there were those that really und erstood that we were there to help them, that we were there for support. And then there were those that just felt like we were almost like an extension of the strong arm of the provost and it's like, you know, they're here to tell me what I'm doing wrong or to challenge me or to, you know, make sure I'm doing the right thing.

These perspectives required participating CTL leaders to not only be aware of faculty perceptions, but also ensure they navigate those sources of potential tension. Misha shared her own experiences figuring out these dynamics:

But my boss knew for this to get buy in, it's not something I could create by myself and I almost feel like a politician. Like we would go and feel people out to see, hey, they would be good on this committee, they'll play nicely. And that's different, you know? Normally you just go into a conference room and whoever is there is there. You don't get to pick and choose in business.

Misha, in describing the politician approach, commented, "I want to stay in the middle much as possible because either way, you know, I still have to work with them – get more flies with honey." Participants were cognizant of the various perspectives at work between administrators and faculty members and sought to ensure a balanced approach with both sides. Colleen also recognized this role and described that it was primarily their aim to get out of the way for what faculty wished to accomplish, while giving them tools to drive the conversations around online learning and technology at her institution:

I went to a POD [Professional and Organizational Development] Network conference and there were some people they had a session for new [CTL] directors. Most of the people in the room were having problems with getting faculty to come except for myself and a couple other people who realized that the [CTL] is for the faculty. So, it's not like I come up with programs and create it and then say, "Here's this program and you all come". No, I let the faculty come up with ideas and they tell me what they want to do. Because it's generated by them, the faculty come, because it's theirs. That was the big advice that

we gave everybody, that you can't just go top down, you have to go bottom up and let them decide what they're interested in.

CTL leaders identified their role with faculty and administration as central to the future of online learning initiatives, and also to wider institutional aims. A key component of this role was representing perspectives of both faculty and administrative groups and helping others navigate those viewpoints to accomplish goals. These functions, operating within administrative structures, but building on rapport and trust, aligned with enabling leadership as a potential framework for use.

Discussion

While recognizing the position of CTLs as catalysts for change, the aim of this study was to explore the lived experiences of CTL leaders as they are in the midst of implementing online learning initiatives, a potential source of institutional change. The literature has provided details on CTLs, their programmatic offerings, and the background of their leaders, but has not explored the perceptions of CTL leaders in their role within strategic initiatives, such as online learning.

Administrative Leadership of CTL leaders

Participants in the research study discussed the active role they played in online learning initiatives on their campuses. In exploring the perceived administrative leadership role that CTL leaders possess, participants did not express strong identification with this role. CTL leaders identified other offices or individuals on their campuses as the primary administrative drivers for online learning initiatives. Instead of identifying with the administrative leadership role in online learning initiatives, participants instead saw themselves as mediators with the faculty, advancing the administrative initiatives coming from other sources.

CTL leaders lack of strong identification with administrative leadership is not wholly surprising, given the existing research around CTLs and their institutional role. Sorcinelli (2002), in providing guidance for unit roles, stated that CTLs "should provide support and service to academic leaders - without being perceived as an arm of the administration" (p. 11). Nemko and Simpson (1991) suggested that CTL leaders must establish rapport among the faculty and articulate their mission and goals without being viewed as an extension of the administration itself. CTL leaders interviewed were aware of the tension between these roles and shared that their role as mediator was the primary means of administrative work, even though they would identify others as leading online learning initiatives.

Adaptive Leadership of CTL leaders

CTL leaders described their experiences in interacting with faculty as relational and built on trust and rapport-building rather than based on their position at the institution. This approach aligned with the function of adaptive leadership as described in complexity leadership theory (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). CTL leaders made themselves widely available and provided informal opportunities for faculty to connect with them. These approaches were seen as effective given that most participants shared that there was no institutional expectation that faculty work with their office. Participants described one-on-one meetings, showcasing faculty work, and a willingness to quickly respond and engage with those who seek help as influential factors in garnering trust among faculty members.

The literature regarding CTLs and the types of offerings they provide aligns with those elements described by participants, including one-on-one consultations, faculty showcases, and other means to empower faculty (Pchenitchnaia & Cole, 2009). In addition to not appearing as an extension of an institution's administration, it is important for CTL leaders to be highly visible and accessible (Sorcinelli, 2002). This is largely because of the personal connections and individual rapport building that associates CTLs not as much with an office, but with the individual leaders within the unit. Similarly, approaches that were responsive to faculty needs and provided just-in-time resources have been identified by researchers as effective faculty development practices in previous studies (Baran, 2016; Grant, 2004).

Enabling Leadership of CTL Leaders

The third leadership function found in complexity leadership theory is enabling leadership, which serves as a mediator of both the hierarchical leadership approaches of administrative leadership and the informal and dynamic approaches of adaptive leadership (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). Participants in the study did acknowledge tensions within the role and articulated methods they used to navigate the positions and perspectives of both faculty and administrators that could differ or at times be adversarial.

CTL leaders were able to articulate ways in which they used their role to both understand administrative and faculty perspectives and to communicate those perspectives in ways that increased understanding and buy-in from all parties. Trisha articulated instances in which their intervention was important in order to help administrators understand the impact and potential reaction from faculty of certain decisions related to programming for online faculty. Jesse also was keenly aware of the potential for faculty to see the work of the CTL as both a unit of support for faculty and as "an extension of the strong arm of the provost" and communicated ways in which to navigate those perceptions. In balancing these perspectives, CTL leaders had to understand the perspectives, but also be adept at communicating with all groups in ways that would be accepted and understood, avoiding entanglement with the differing perspectives, a key function of enabling leadership (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007).

The role of CTL leader in the existing literature has been compared to that of a tightrope walker. The position has required leaders to be "particularly diplomatic in their words and deeds, especially involving issues in which faculty and administrators are opposed" (Zahorski, 1993, p. 243). The nature of the CTL role has been described as consultive (Jacobson et al., 2009), bridge-building (Singer, 2002), and facilitative (Zahorski, 1993). CTL leaders are also increasingly required to balance concerns associated with faculty development and technology with institutional requirements (Jones, 2003; McCarthy & Samors, 2009). These elements explored in the literature align with the experiences described above and the ability to navigate tensions is a key theme in this research study and a strength of CTL leaders and their units.

Complexity Leadership Theory as an Appropriate Framework

Based on the findings of the study, the conceptual framework guiding this study is inadequate in addressing the role of CTL leaders in online learning initiatives at small, private colleges. As described in the discussion above, participants readily described their work in areas that aligned with adaptive and enabling leadership functions. CTL leaders leveraged informal and adaptive approaches to working with faculty and sought to empower faculty members while also balancing the administrative needs of their direct supervisors. CTL leaders, however, did not have a strong association with the administrative leadership functions as espoused by complexity leadership theory. Participants identified other individuals or positions which applied more concrete directives for online learning and CTL leaders saw themselves as mediators of those directives in ways that would increase faculty acceptance and buy-in. As a result, the conceptual framework guiding the study has been revised below to better reflect that experience of CTL leaders as described by participants. In the revised framework (see Figure 5), CTL leaders have a small overlap into the administrative leadership area, but are situated largely in the space of adaptive and enabling leadership. Rather than being active agents in the work of administrative leadership, CTL leaders act as a filter for administration directives, recognizing their role as mediators. The position of the CTL leader is not wholly outside of the sphere of administrative leadership, however, as participants were also deeply aware of administrative expectations and constraints, but able to translate these areas for broad faculty acceptance.

Figure 5. Revised conceptual framework based on the research study results and the three leadership functions of complexity leadership theory (Uhl-Bien, Marion, & McKelvey, 2007).

Based on the exploration of the three functions of complexity leadership theory, there is still inadequate explanation for administrative leadership functions when solely examining the role of CTL leaders. As CTL leaders identified several organizational positions as candidates for the administrative leadership function, this may be an area for further research in online learning leadership.

Implications for Practice

The findings in this study have several implications for practice particularly for small, private colleges undertaking online learning initiatives. As research has indicated common programming, structures, and roles among CTLs

across a variety of institutional types (Meyer & Murrell, 2014), these implications may also be generalizable for a wider audience. For online learning initiatives, the findings indicate CTL leaders are well-suited to guide online learning initiatives stemming from institutional directives. Participating CTL leaders represented both traditional roles of a CTL arising from traditional faculty development initiatives, however all participants were highly capable in integrating technology and employment of online learning practices. As a result, in environments where a distinct division dedicated to online learning is not established, CTL leaders may be looked to as stewards of online learning in the stage of early adoption. Despite not having a strong identification with administrative authority and leadership, CTL leaders may be the most well-equipped leaders on campus to assist in guiding online learning initiatives, particularly if the initiative is contentious among faculty, because of their dedication to representing faculty input and fostering engagement. Care should be taken to ensure that CTL leaders are supported and that their involvement is in service to equipping faculty (Sorcinelli, 2002). CTL leaders can also be looked to as key voices in vetting ideas and concepts related to online learning and other initiatives, willing to speak directly to administrators as advocates for faculty and representing faculty perceptions as part of their work.

For CTL leaders, the study suggests that there are many areas, including online learning initiatives, where their skills in navigating institutional dynamics are highly needed. CTL leaders should look for avenues at the institutional level where mediators between various stakeholders are needed and seek roles as mediators for institutional change. As noted by the CTL leaders in this study, leaders in these positions are adapt at navigating change and tackling multiple roles. Care should also be given by both CTL leaders and their supervisors to ensure that despite their ability to take on multiple roles, CTL leaders' workload is not extended beyond their capabilities. At institutions where online learning has a dedicated division or unit, CTL leaders may still be valuable advocates for bridging the gap between administrative and faculty aims in the online space.

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