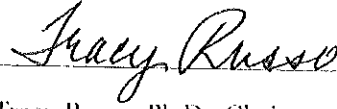


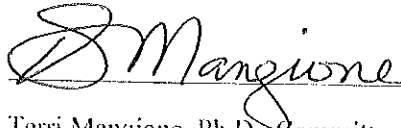
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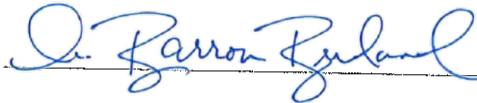
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ANCHORED IN MISSION: DECISION-MAKING AMONG STUDENT AFFAIRS
ADMINISTRATORS IN JESUIT UNIVERSITIES DURING THE COVID-19 CRISIS

By
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A DISSERTATION IN PRACTICE

Submitted to the faculty of the Graduate School of Creighton University in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education in
Interdisciplinary Leadership

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic profoundly disrupted higher education, requiring institutional leaders to make rapid decisions while balancing financial sustainability, public health imperatives, and mission-driven commitments. At Jesuit colleges and universities, these challenges were further shaped by fundamental Jesuit tenants. This study examines how eight executive leaders in student affairs at Jesuit institutions reported the navigation of decision-making during the crisis, exploring the interplay between corporate (financial and operational) and Jesuit (mission-driven) decision-making premises.

Using a qualitative research design, the study employed semi-structured interviews to examine reported leadership strategies and institutional responses. Grounded in Servant Leadership, Adaptive Leadership, Transformational Leadership, and Crisis Leadership, the study explores how leaders integrated Jesuit values into crisis management.

Findings indicate that leaders who balanced mission-based commitments with pragmatic decision-making reported more successful institutional outcomes. The study also highlights tensions between shared governance and the urgency of decision-making, as well as the influence of stakeholder engagement and external pressures on leadership choices. This research contributes to crisis leadership in higher education, particularly in faith-based institutions, by offering insights into mission-driven governance and future crisis preparedness.

Keywords: Jesuit higher education, crisis leadership, decision-making, student affairs, COVID-19, servant leadership, adaptive leadership, transformational leadership, cura personalis, mission-driven leadership

DEDICATION

To my Grandma Maxine and Grandpa Wayne, who risked so much so that I could have the opportunity to go to college. Their selflessness allowed the spark within me to be lit. I carry their tenacity and hospitality with me every day.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Introduction and Background

Between 2019 and 2022, the COVID-19 pandemic forced multifaceted organizations like colleges and universities to make complex, time-sensitive decisions in response to rapidly changing federal, state, local, and institutional regulations and requirements. These unanticipated challenges involved many stakeholders – students, faculty, staff, communities, vendors, and suppliers – and had profound financial implications. In addition to the practical questions in responding to these challenges, mission-based universities also needed to acknowledge the tenets of their missions in their decision-making. Because the stakes were considerable, financially, operationally, and in support of their philosophical principles, mission-based universities such as the 27 Jesuit colleges and universities in the US faced potentially conflicting decision premises in addressing their operational responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. While COVID-19 required a utilitarian approach to many operational decisions, such as compliance with local, state, and federal regulations, many mission-related decisions required a more nuanced approach. COVID-19 response decision-making involved the heart, the head, and the soul of mission-oriented institutional leaders. The alignment and privileges of these decision-making premises merit further evaluation.

According to the Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities (AJCU), a national organization, there are 27 Jesuit colleges and universities in the United States and 189 Jesuit institutions of higher learning worldwide. Jesuits and lay followers incorporate the tenets of Ignatian Spirituality into their daily lives, shaping the foundation of Jesuit institutions. These schools exist alongside other denominational or mission-

based colleges and universities in the United States, each embracing a religious mission or direction. While the entire higher education sector faced difficult pandemic decisions, mission-based institutions—like Jesuit schools—grappled with added complexity because of their deep service and community engagement traditions.

The COVID-19 pandemic, caused by the novel coronavirus SARS-CoV-2, has been one of the most severe global health crises in recent history (World Health Organization [WHO], 2021). As of April 28, 2024, over 775 million confirmed cases and more than 7 million deaths have been reported worldwide (World Health Organization [WHO], 2024). The pandemic has had a profound and rapid impact on various facets of daily life since early 2020.

Specifically, the pandemic required significant attention to how colleges and universities approached decision-making. Institutions faced challenges assessing their financial health and community influence, including viral spread, employee wellbeing, and capacity to support the broader community. Each university approached decisions differently, considering location, size, resources, and government regulations. They had to assess their unique circumstances and determine the best course of action to safeguard the health and wellbeing of their communities.

For more than three hundred years of higher education in America, colleges and universities have played a multidimensional role in society. Predominantly, they serve as an institution of higher education where students can pursue academic and professional knowledge, skills, and qualifications. Additionally, these institutions often contribute to research and innovation, advancing human knowledge and technological progress. Colleges and universities also serve as hubs for cultural enrichment, fostering diversity

and critical thinking among students. Finally, they play a vital role in workforce development, preparing graduates to enter the job market and contribute to their communities' economic and social wellbeing.

Higher education institutions are encouraged to go beyond subject-specific education and develop essential 21st-century professional skills such as analytical thinking, problem-solving, communication, and intercultural competence. This preparation involves offering opportunities for students to engage with global issues, participate in study abroad programs, collaborate with international peers, and gain exposure to diverse perspectives. Through these methods, higher education is essential in educating young individuals, driving research discovery, and fostering economic growth and impact within the communities and regions they serve. Furthermore, many institutions operate as self-contained communities with residential areas, dining facilities, recreation facilities, police departments, physical plants, and more.

Nearly every part of institutional life, and day-to-day life, for that matter, was abruptly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Higher education leaders faced many challenges and had to make complex business decisions to ensure the continuity of education while prioritizing the health and safety of students, faculty, staff, and external stakeholders. Universities responded to the pandemic with increased flexibility, innovation, and adaptability to meet evolving challenges.

The extraordinary institutional changes and decision-making for colleges and universities during the pandemic merit examination. This dissertation-in-practice study explored how decision-making in the context of the pandemic reflected the interplay between mission-oriented decision premises and business-oriented decision premises of

Jesuit colleges and universities. This chapter introduces the study, outlines the problem statement, and describes the purpose of the study, identifies the research question and the aim of the study, defines relevant terms, presents methodology overview, and ends with reflections of the scholar-practitioner.

Statement of the Problem

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many institutions tasked Student Affairs Divisions with maintaining their foundational responsibilities while rapidly adapting to new challenges that fundamentally altered their roles. The pandemic disrupted nearly every aspect of campus life, creating a crisis that extended far beyond public health concerns and into academic operations, student engagement, housing, financial support, and mental health services. What had once been routine, mission-driven work became crisis response, requiring Student Affairs professionals to enforce evolving policies, address student anxieties, and fill critical gaps in institutional leadership.

The responsibilities of Student Affairs professionals shifted dramatically, requiring them to take on roles that extended beyond their traditional scope. While they prioritized student wellbeing, unprecedented logistical, financial, and ethical dilemmas reshaped their work. They became responsible for enforcing public health mandates, addressing mental health concerns exacerbated by isolation, managing the complexities of student housing, advocating for financial relief, and developing virtual engagement strategies—all while navigating their own professional and personal challenges.

The following examples illustrate the expanded roles and responsibilities of Student Affairs professionals during the COVID-19 pandemic and the institutional challenges they had to navigate:

1. **Health and Safety Measures:** Student Affairs staff were at the forefront of implementing and communicating health and safety measures to protect students and the campus community. They coordinated efforts related to COVID-19 testing, contact tracing, quarantine and isolation protocols, and enforcement of safety guidelines. Additionally, these same professionals were involved in decisions around vaccine requirements and administration throughout the pandemic, from setting up clinic logistics and communicating distribution plans to managing compliance tracking and exemptions. This task took on particular nuance at Jesuit and other faith-based institutions that had to contend with religious exemptions and novel legal arguments around personal freedom and community health.
2. **Transition to Remote Learning:** As many institutions shifted to online learning, Student Affairs professionals supported students adjusting to remote education. They offered resources for online learning, technology assistance, and accommodations for students with special needs.
3. **Mental Health Support:** The pandemic's impact on mental health was significant for both staff and students, with increased stress, anxiety, and isolation. Student Affairs teams provided virtual counseling services, support groups, and wellness programs to help students cope with these challenges.
4. **Student Engagement and Connection:** With limited in-person interactions, Student Affairs worked creatively to maintain a sense of community and connection among students. They organized virtual events, student organizations, and social activities to foster a sense of belonging. They developed new ways to

collaborate across campus while delivering new programs and student engagement opportunities.

5. **Housing and Residential Life:** Student Affairs managed the safe housing arrangements during the pandemic for institutions with on-campus housing. Negotiating the intricacies of residency eligibility, they faced the challenge of discerning which students could remain in on-campus housing and who needed to relocate. In addition to communicating safety guidelines and orchestrating move-in and move-out procedures, Student Affairs professionals went above and beyond regular duties. They supported students in quarantine or isolation by implementing measures like meal delivery to meet their essential needs while keeping them distanced from others.
6. **Financial Support and Advocacy:** Student Affairs staff assisted students in navigating financial challenges caused by the pandemic. They provided information about financial aid options and emergency funding and connected students with resources to alleviate financial hardships.
7. **Academic and Career Support:** Student Affairs teams worked closely with academic advisors and career services to ensure students received academic support and career guidance during remote learning. They provided resources for academic success and assisted with internship and job opportunities.
8. **International Student Support:** Student affairs personnel provided guidance and support to international students facing challenges such as travel restrictions and visa concerns. They helped international students with visa extensions, remote enrollment, and cultural adjustments.

9. **Advocacy and Equity:** In the wake of George Floyd's murder in May 2020, institutions faced an intensified responsibility to address the pressing demands of marginalized groups (NASPA & NADOHE, 2020). This tragic event underscored the need for a renewed commitment to equity and inclusivity. Student Affairs professionals played a crucial role in facilitating virtual education and dialogues on race, creating spaces for meaningful conversations, and driving institutional efforts toward fostering a more equitable and just campus environment
10. **Communication and Crisis Management:** Student Affairs divisions were critical in communicating information to students and families about campus updates, resources, and policy changes during the pandemic. Managing the ensuing anger and animosity related to institutional decisions, which Student Affairs had to enforce, proved particularly draining for many staff members, compounded by the simultaneous adjustment to their own remote work logistics and managing personal and family situations. Despite these challenges, Student Affairs professionals persevered, actively participating in crisis management teams to effectively address emergent issues and maintain open lines of communication with the campus community.

In summary, during the COVID-19 pandemic, Student Affairs Divisions in colleges and universities faced the unprecedented challenge of maintaining their foundational responsibilities amidst significant disruptions to campus life, academic operations, and students' personal experiences. Professionals dedicated to supporting student wellbeing and success adapted to new roles and environments, often grappling with the draining dynamics of remote work and the enforcement of evolving health

protocols. The pandemic also intensified existing social justice issues, compelling Student Affairs staff to address heightened inequities exacerbated by the crisis.

Compounding these challenges, many institutions implemented staff furloughs and layoffs due to financial strains, further stretching the capacities of Student Affairs teams (Bauman, 2020; Whitford, 2020). Despite these obstacles, their unwavering commitment played a crucial role in guiding students through the myriad challenges presented by the pandemic.

The limited research exploring the real-world decision-making experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic within the realm of college leadership presents a substantial challenge. This knowledge gap hampers our ability to gain insights into how leaders can enhance their preparedness for future crises and position their institutions for sustained success. While crises may be inherently unpredictable, they are not altogether unexpected, and leaders will consistently find themselves tasked with addressing problems and crises of varying magnitudes (Coombs, 2019). How leaders respond to such crises, including their ability to balance immediate crisis management demands with the long-term institutional strategy, significantly influences the institution's performance during and after the crisis. The absence of this critical information highlights the need to understand better how mission-based leaders balance the priorities of mission-based decision-making in the face of a crisis such as COVID-19.

Purpose of the Study

This study examines how Jesuit-affiliated higher education administrators made decisions during the COVID-19 pandemic, identifying where mission-informed decision-making influenced business-related outcomes at Jesuit-run colleges and universities. It

also explores how administrators actively applied and demonstrated their institutions' Jesuit values in their decision-making during periods of rapid and disruptive change. This study examines decision-makers in Jesuit student affairs divisions during the COVID-19 pandemic to assess the interplay between mission-based and corporate decision-making.

Research Question

The following research questions guide this qualitative study:

- What decision premises do executive leaders of Jesuit-affiliated student affairs divisions report were part of their decision-making to address COVID-19 challenges?
- How did executive leaders of Jesuit-affiliated student affairs divisions apply corporate decision premises or mission-related decision premises to university decisions during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Aim of the Study

The aim of this dissertation in practice is to identify decision-making premises, both Jesuit and secular, during the disruptive change of the COVID-19 pandemic in Jesuit-affiliated student affairs divisions. Analyzing this contemporary example can offer insights for Jesuit Student Affairs leadership on applying Jesuit principles in future decision-making activities. As disruptive changes are expected to persist, understanding the decision-making premises in the context of the pandemic provides applicable lessons for the future. Universities, as microcosms of society, have faced seismic shifts in the higher education landscape, encompassing mental health concerns, campus controversies, racial injustices, political divisions, and pandemics. With a focus on diversity, inclusion, student development, and leadership, Student Affairs divisions will continually encounter

changes and adaptations in supporting students. Gaining insight into the core of the leadership experience of the COVID-19 pandemic, a fundamental aspect of phenomenology (Creswell & Poth, 2018), provides valuable guidance on how Student Affairs leaders at Jesuit institutions may ready themselves to leverage Jesuit principles effectively in future decision-making.

Definition of Relevant Terms

The following terms are used throughout the study to provide a common language:

- *Decision-making premise:* Decision-making premises refer to the underlying assumptions, beliefs, and data that influence the choices made by individuals, organizations, or governments when facing a particular situation or problem (Luhmann, 2018). During the pandemic, decision-making premises played a critical role in shaping responses and strategies to respond to and mitigate the pandemic's impact.
- *Higher Education Administrator:* In higher education, administrators hold the critical role of supervising various aspects such as college or university departments, faculty, staff, curricula, budgets, and facilities. Regardless of the title they bear—be it dean, director, or chair—their primary focus is overseeing and streamlining the daily operations of the educational institution. They strive to ensure that students receive an exceptional educational experience and play a pivotal role in shaping the institution's offerings and fostering its growth (Berklee, 2022).
- *Jesuit Colleges and Universities:* Jesuit colleges and universities are

educational institutions affiliated with the Society of Jesus, a religious order within the Roman Catholic Church. St. Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits, established the educational philosophy and values that shaped and guided these institutions. Jesuit colleges and universities root their mission characteristics in the Jesuit tradition and follow the principles of Ignatian spirituality. The combination of academic excellence, social justice, ethical values, and a commitment to the development of the whole person distinguishes Jesuit colleges and universities and defines their unique mission in higher education (Association of Jesuit Colleges, 2019).

- *COVID-19 Pandemic:* The COVID-19 pandemic refers to the global outbreak of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) caused by the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) (Rauf, et. Al, 2020). The pandemic is characterized by sustained and widespread virus transmission across multiple countries and regions, significantly increasing confirmed cases, hospitalizations, and deaths. The pandemic exhibited high infectivity and spread through respiratory droplets, close contact, and contaminated surfaces. The World Health Organization (WHO) declared the COVID-19 pandemic on March 11, 2020, acknowledging its global impact on public health, economies, and daily life activities. Responses to the COVID-19 pandemic include implementing various public health measures such as lockdowns, social distancing, mask mandates, testing, contact tracing, and vaccination campaigns to control the spread of the virus and mitigate its impact on healthcare systems and vulnerable populations.

- *Normative Decision-making*: Normative decision-making techniques refer to approaches that align with established standards, principles, or ideals. In the context of this dissertation, "normative decision-making techniques" specifically entail decision-making consistent with the principles and mission of Jesuit education.
- *Descriptive Decision-Making*: Descriptive decision-making techniques involve practical, pragmatic approaches considering real-world, often business-focused considerations. In the context of this dissertation, "descriptive decision-making techniques" refer to methods that acknowledge and prioritize practical and business-oriented aspects within the decision-making process.
- *Business decision premise*: Decision premises related to organizational decision-making and/or strategy; not connected to Jesuit, Catholic values. Examples could be financial, compliance, or regulatory. They could include market conditions, economic forecasts, industry trends, customer behavior, competitor actions, financial data, and other factors influencing decision-making.
- *Ignatian decision premises*: Decision premises that are related to organizational decision-making and connected to Jesuit Catholic values. Examples include *Cura Personalis*, *Magis*, *Cura Apostolica*, Women and Men for and with Others, Unity of Heart, Mind, and Soul, *Ad Majorem Dei Glorium*, and Forming and Educating Agents of Change.
 - *Cura Personalis*: is a Latin phrase that translates to "care for the whole

person" or "care for the individual." It is often associated with specific institutions' educational and healthcare philosophies, particularly within Jesuit education and healthcare traditions. *Cura Personalis* emphasizes a holistic approach to caring for individuals, considering their physical needs and emotional, intellectual, spiritual, and social wellbeing (Kolvenbach, P.-H., 1992).

- *Magis*: is a Latin term that translates to "more" or "greater." It is a concept often associated with the educational and spiritual traditions of the Society of Jesus (Jesuits). *Magis* encourages individuals to strive for excellence, seek the greater good, and do more for others and themselves. It embodies the idea of constantly seeking to do better, to go beyond the minimum requirements, and to make a more significant impact in one's personal and professional life. *Magis* is a guiding principle that encourages individuals to pursue academic or professional success and develop a more profound sense of purpose, ethics, and social responsibility (Kolvenbach, P.-H., 1992).
- *Women and Men for and with Others*: is deeply rooted in the Jesuit tradition and educational philosophy. It emphasizes the idea that individuals should be committed to serving and working alongside others for the greater good of society. This concept encourages people to cultivate a sense of social responsibility, empathy, and a willingness to contribute to the wellbeing of their communities and the world at large (Kolvenbach, P.-H., 1992).

- *Unity of Heart, Mind, and Soul:* is a concept that emphasizes the alignment and harmony of a person's emotional, intellectual, and spiritual dimensions. It suggests that when these aspects of an individual are in sync and balanced, they can lead a more fulfilled and purposeful life (Kolvenbach, P.-H., 1992).
- *Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam:* is a Latin phrase that translates to "For the Greater Glory of God." This phrase encapsulates a central principle of Jesuit spirituality and mission. It emphasizes that all actions and endeavors should serve to give glory to God. It encourages individuals to live their lives in service to others and to pursue excellence in all they do, whether in academics, work, or service, to honor and glorify God (Kolvenbach, P.-H., 1992).
- *Forming and Educating Agents of Change* refers to preparing individuals to be proactive and influential in making positive and transformative contributions to society. It encourages them to proactively identify and address societal issues and use their knowledge, values, and skills to drive positive and lasting change in their communities and the world (Kolvenbach, P.-H., 1992).
- *Cura Apostolica:* This Latin translates to "care for the work" or "care for the ministry." It stresses the responsibility to uphold and fulfill Jesuit ministries' and institutions' missions and objectives. *Cura Apostolica* focuses on the wellbeing and effectiveness of apostolic endeavors, ensuring they align with Jesuit values and serve the greater good. This

concept complements *Cura Personalis*, highlighting the balance between caring for individuals and the broader mission (Jesuits Global, 2020).

Methodology Overview

This study is grounded in a qualitative methodology and phenomenological design. The study sought to identify two types of decision premises the executive leaders at Jesuit-affiliated student affairs divisions drew on as bases for change decisions during the COVID-19 pandemic and how each type contributed to decisions. Van Manen (2014) describes phenomenological qualitative research as research designed to delve into individuals' lived experiences and perceptions concerning a specific phenomenon. The approach involves conducting in-depth interviews or observations to unveil participants' unique perspectives and the meanings they assign to their experiences. The primary goal is to grasp the phenomenon's essence from the participants' viewpoint, emphasizing their subjective interpretations rather than seeking generalizable results (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Qualitative researchers prioritize rich, descriptive data and select a small, purposive sample to gain a deep understanding of the phenomenon under study. This approach allows influential participants involved in their university's COVID-19 responses to share their perspectives on how they determined responses to pandemic challenges. The analysis will draw on the participants' stories to recount their experiences. This method allows participants to identify the premises behind their decisions and interpret their experiences (Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007). The phenomenological approach examines how meaning presents itself through experience (Polkinghorne, 1989).

In this approach, invited participants will reflect on the lessons they learned about decision-making, the perspectives they gained, and the meaning they found in their experiences. This study will use a qualitative methodology to capture the meaning of participants' behaviors, providing a deeper understanding of the context of rapid change and the impact of those behaviors in real-life situations. Additionally, this approach will allow the researcher to explore multiple decision-making premises to learn about the lived experiences of Jesuit-affiliated higher education administrators during the COVID-19 Pandemic.

Phenomenology emphasizes the significance of ensuring that all participants have personally experienced the phenomenon of interest (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As a result, this study delimited the population and sample to higher education executive leaders responsible for COVID-19 decision-making. Ideally, these leaders came from the Student Affairs organization, but the study also considered other executive leaders who played a significant role in the pandemic response.

The study includes eight staff members who participated as primary decision-makers or active participants in a university's COVID-19 response. This study aimed to include a sample of eight Student Affairs staff members who actively served as primary decision-makers or participants in their university's COVID-19 response. The selected group came from the 27 US Jesuit institutions (Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities-a, n.d.). Identifying and approaching individuals for participation was conducted via email solicitation and nomination from executive leaders at these Jesuit institutions.

Delimitations, Limitations, and Personal Biases

The delimitations, limitations, and personal biases in the following section outline the study's boundaries (Roberts & Hyatt, 2019). The research implemented specific eliminations to ensure a manageable dissertation in practice study and align the study's scope with the chosen phenomenology methodology. The study delimited the period to align with the phenomenon of interest, spanning from March 2020, when states across the United States began implementing restrictive safety measures due to the COVID-19 pandemic, to the fall of 2022, when most US Jesuit institutions lifted their pandemic-related restrictions. The researcher identified several potential and expected limitations within the study. One significant limitation involves participants' natural inclination to present their organizations positively, which, although not involving outright dishonesty, could introduce bias into the collected data.

Additionally, university leaders' time constraints and responsibilities posed challenges in securing their participation. Furthermore, the demands of the academic year timeline presented obstacles in data collection. Memory loss over time, particularly when referencing events from the distant past, is another potential limitation. The overwhelming impact of the pandemic on participants' lives may affect their ability to recall specific incidents or decisions accurately. Moreover, identifying the appropriate individuals within Jesuit organizations involved in their COVID-19 response is challenging because each institution approached the pandemic differently, assigning various roles and responsibilities to different individuals. As a result, understanding each institution's unique organizational structure was necessary to determine the right

participants. It is crucial to carefully consider these limitations to ensure a balanced understanding of the results.

Due to inherent limitations and variations in institutional contexts, it is essential to recognize that the outcomes of this study may not be universally applicable across diverse academic institutions. Institutional characteristics, including organizational culture, governance structures, financial resources, mission priorities, regulatory environments, and external influences, may constrain the participants' agency in decision-making processes. These contextual factors can influence the depth and scope of participants' contributions and the generalizability of the study's findings. Furthermore, challenges may arise in identifying and securing the availability of suitable participants, adding a layer of complexity to the research. Notwithstanding these acknowledged limitations, the primary aim of this study remained to extract valuable insights into the nuanced decision-making processes and experiences of executive leaders in higher education. This study specifically focuses on understanding the dynamics of their responses to the challenges posed by the pandemic within the distinctive context of American Jesuit institutions.

Phenomenology encourages researchers to "bracket out" or acknowledge their personal experiences with the phenomenon of interest (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher has direct experience with the phenomenon of interest: institutional response during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study will incorporate bracketing and employ strategies such as memoing before and after each interview and conducting member checks, as appropriate, to ensure the trustworthiness of the data and account for the researcher's direct experience during the pandemic. Additionally, the deliberate selection

of participants demonstrates an intentional commitment to inclusivity, considering various dimensions of diversity, including but not limited to race, gender, and tenure at the institution. By intentionally seeking representation across a spectrum of experiences, the study aims to encompass a rich diversity of perspectives, extending beyond those that may be immediately familiar to the researcher. This approach will contribute to a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the issues under investigation.

Reflections of the Scholar-Practitioner

My journey as a scholar-practitioner in Jesuit Higher Education has been shaped by both professional experience and academic inquiry. As a leader in student affairs, I have witnessed firsthand how Jesuit values, particularly *cura personalis* (care for the whole person) and *cura apostolica* (care for the institution's mission), serve as guiding principles in decision-making. However, the events of 2020 and the COVID-19 pandemic presented an unprecedented challenge that forced leaders, including myself, to reconcile operational necessity with deeply held mission-driven commitments. The tension between financial sustainability, public health imperatives, and Jesuit identity became more pronounced than ever. These realities inspired my research as I sought to understand how Jesuit decision-makers navigated one of the most disruptive moments in modern higher education.

The Ignatian tradition of reflection has played a critical role in my leadership and scholarship. It fosters a restless and inquisitive mindset, urging leaders to discern solutions that might otherwise go unnoticed or seem too daunting to pursue (Lowney, 2003). This commitment to continuous discernment aligns with the core values of my Doctor of Education (EdD) in Interdisciplinary Leadership program, shaping my

approach to leadership theories, ethical decision-making, and mission-driven governance. Through this research, I aim to contribute to the growing body of knowledge on crisis leadership in Jesuit higher education, offering insights into how institutions can balance mission and operational realities during times of uncertainty.

Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic presented an unprecedented challenge for higher education institutions, requiring leaders to make rapid and complex decisions while balancing financial sustainability, public health mandates, and institutional mission. With their strong commitment to *cura personalis*, social justice, and ethical decision-making, Jesuit colleges and universities faced additional pressures to align their responses with Ignatian values. This study examines how eight executive leaders in Jesuit-affiliated student affairs divisions navigated decision-making during the pandemic, balancing corporate decision premises (e.g., financial and operational sustainability) with Jesuit decision premises (e.g., mission alignment and holistic student care).

This dissertation explores the reported lived experiences of these leaders and how they integrated Jesuit principles into crisis response strategies through a qualitative, phenomenological approach. The research is grounded in Servant Leadership (Greenleaf, 1977), Adaptive Leadership (Heifetz et al., 2009), Transformational Leadership (Burns, 1978; Bass, 1985), and Crisis Leadership (Boin et al., 2017) to analyze how mission-based leadership influenced institutional decision-making in a time of disruption.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Over the past decade, the higher education landscape has undergone shifts that have informed and reshaped colleges and universities' academic and social environments. Escalating concerns surrounding mental health, the proliferation of campus controversies, the persistent battle against racial injustices, and the growing influence of political division have not only influenced the student experience but have also challenged the fundamental principles and practices of colleges and universities. Responses to these changes provide insight into the evolving nature of higher education institutions.

The COVID-19 pandemic reshaped nearly every aspect of higher education, forcing institutions to make critical, high-stakes decisions in an environment of immense uncertainty. Colleges and universities, long accustomed to incremental policy adjustments, were suddenly thrust into a landscape where immediate and decisive action was required. Student Affairs professionals mainly found themselves at the intersection of institutional priorities and student wellbeing, navigating complex leadership challenges while maintaining their institutions' core commitments.

At Jesuit-affiliated institutions, leaders faced a significant tension between mission-driven leadership and financial sustainability, raising fundamental questions: How do leaders balance institutional values with business realities in times of crisis? How does a mission-based decision-making framework shape leadership choices under pressure?

This chapter reviews the literature on decision-making, crisis leadership, and mission-driven governance. It examines how Jesuit institutions, in particular, approach leadership in times of disruption and explores how leadership frameworks such as

Servant Leadership (Greenleaf, 1977), Adaptive Leadership (Heifetz et al., 2009), and Transformational Leadership (Burns, 1978; Bass, 1985) inform crisis decision-making. Additionally, it incorporates Crisis Leadership Theory (Boin et al., 2017) to contextualize how universities—especially Jesuit institutions—responded to the COVID-19 pandemic.

COVID-19 Pandemic

The Global Crisis and Its Impact on Higher Education

The COVID-19 pandemic was an unprecedented global crisis that fundamentally disrupted nearly every aspect of modern life. The virus, which originated in late 2019, quickly spread across the globe, leading to widespread illness and death, economic instability, and social upheaval (CDC, 2019). Governments, businesses, and higher education institutions were forced to make decisions with limited information, often balancing public health concerns with economic and operational realities.

At colleges and universities, COVID-19 fundamentally altered institutional operations. The pandemic forced campus closures, a rapid shift to remote learning, disruptions in enrollment patterns, financial crises, and heightened concerns over student wellbeing (Moore, 2020). Institutions had to make difficult trade-offs regarding safety measures, instructional delivery, housing, student services, and long-term financial stability.

Pandemic Presence in Higher Education and Student Affairs Professionals' Role

The COVID-19 pandemic upended nearly every aspect of higher education, disrupting academic operations, student life, and institutional governance in ways few had previously imagined. Unlike other disruptions in higher education—such as financial downturns, policy shifts, or regional natural disasters—the pandemic created a prolonged

crisis that demanded immediate, sustained, and multifaceted institutional responses. Colleges and universities were forced to make difficult decisions in real-time, often without precedent or clear guidance, as they sought to safeguard public health while continuing to fulfill their educational mission (Boin et al., 2017).

Though no two institutions responded in precisely the same way, specific themes emerged across the higher education landscape. Student Affairs professionals have long played a vital role in fostering student development and institutional success, a responsibility that became even more pronounced during the COVID-19 pandemic (Sandeen, 2004). While institutional responses varied depending on size, financial resources, governance structures, and geographic location, common themes emerged across higher education as leaders navigated the crisis. Student Affairs divisions took on expanded roles, overseeing not only student wellbeing but also implementing evolving public health protocols, addressing surging mental health concerns, and maintaining a sense of community despite the challenges of remote learning and physical distancing. Their leadership extended beyond traditional student support services, directly influencing institutional decision-making and crisis management strategies to ensure that students continued to receive a holistic and mission-driven educational experience. As higher education institutions faced unprecedented disruptions, the ability of Student Affairs professionals to lead with agility and values-driven decision-making became essential to maintaining both student success and institutional stability (Gigliotti, 2020).

Student Affairs professionals experienced rapidly expanded responsibilities as institutions responded to the pandemic. Many found themselves at the center of institutional crisis response efforts, managing critical operational areas, including:

- Health and Safety Measures – Developing, implementing, and enforcing COVID-19 protocols, including testing, contact tracing, quarantine and isolation procedures, and, in some cases, vaccine distribution efforts (American College Health Association [ACHA], 2020).
- Student Mental Health and wellbeing – Addressing an unprecedented surge in mental health concerns as students grappled with isolation, anxiety, and financial stress. Many institutions expanded virtual counseling services, created wellness initiatives, and launched peer support networks to help students cope (Gallagher, 2021).
- Transition to Remote Learning—Ensuring that students have access to the technology, academic support, and accommodations needed to be successful in remote and hybrid learning environments (Means et al., 2020).
- Residential Life and Campus Housing Adjustments – Coordinating quarantine housing, adjusting move-in and move-out protocols, enforcing social distancing measures in residence halls, and supporting students who faced housing insecurity when campuses closed unexpectedly (Schreiber & Ludeman, 2020).
- Crisis Communication and Student Engagement – Serving as key communicators between students, faculty, and institutional leadership by providing timely updates on policy changes, health guidelines, and campus operations. Many Student Affairs divisions also facilitated virtual

programming to sustain a sense of student connection and community (Anderson, 2020).

- Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Efforts—Supporting marginalized and underrepresented student populations that faced disproportionate hardships due to COVID-19. The pandemic coincided with a national racial reckoning in the summer of 2020, requiring Student Affairs leaders to address racial justice issues and campus climate in real time (Pendakur, 2021).

These responsibilities were not new to Student Affairs professionals, but the intensity and scope of their work during the pandemic placed new pressures on their role. Many institutions faced financial challenges, staffing shortages, and heightened public scrutiny, leaving Student Affairs teams stretched thin (Kim & Maloney, 2021). Despite these constraints, they remained a stabilizing force within their institutions, ensuring students' academic success, wellbeing, and personal development remained at the forefront of institutional priorities.

For Jesuit institutions, the pandemic posed an even more significant challenge: how to uphold and operationalize Jesuit values—such as *cura personalis* (care for the whole person) and *cura apostolica* (care for the institution as a whole)—while making difficult decisions about finances, staffing, and public health measures (Kolvenbach, 1992). Leaders had to navigate the tensions between fiscal responsibility and moral obligation, ensuring their institutions remained mission-driven despite financial strain. The Jesuit tenet *Magis*, or the call to strive for greater excellence, became particularly

relevant in decision-making as Student Affairs professionals sought innovative ways to uphold the student experience despite pandemic-induced constraints (Traub, 2017).

In many cases, Jesuit institutions framed their COVID-19 responses through the lens of social justice and community care. They expanded emergency financial aid programs to assist students in need, strengthened food and housing insecurity initiatives, and embraced the principle of "men and women for and with others" to ensure their most vulnerable students were not left behind (Jesuits.org, 2020).

Ultimately, the pandemic underscored the indispensable role of Student Affairs in institutional resilience. These professionals provided not only frontline crisis response, but also shaped policies advocated for students and kept the Jesuit values of holistic education and ethical leadership at the center of decision-making. As institutions move forward, the lessons learned from this experience will continue to shape how Student Affairs divisions support students, build community, and reinforce institutional mission in times of crisis.

Jesuit Higher Education Overview

The Jesuit Educational Mission

Jesuit higher education is deeply rooted in the 480-year-old tradition of the Society of Jesus, a Catholic religious order founded by St. Ignatius of Loyola. Jesuit colleges and universities operate with a distinctive educational philosophy that integrates intellectual rigor, ethical leadership, and a commitment to service. Unlike secular institutions that may focus primarily on academic training and research, Jesuit institutions emphasize the formation of the whole person—intellectually, morally, and spiritually (Kolvenbach, 1999).

Several key principles shape the Jesuit educational tradition, distinguishing its approach to higher education:

- **Academic Excellence:** Jesuit institutions are committed to rigorous intellectual inquiry and the development of critical thinking skills, aiming to educate students who can apply knowledge ethically in service to society (Traub, 2017).
- **Social Justice and Service:** A core tenet of Jesuit education is the concept of forming "Men and Women for and with Others," which emphasizes the responsibility of educated individuals to work toward justice and the common good (Arrupe, 1973).
- **Holistic Education:** Jesuit pedagogy stresses the development of the whole person—mind, body, and spirit—through a combination of academic study, personal reflection, and active engagement with social issues (Kolvenbach, 1999).
- **Critical Thinking and Discernment:** Jesuit education encourages students to engage in discernment, a reflective decision-making process that considers ethical implications, long-term consequences, and personal and communal values (Traub, 2017).

Mission-Driven Leadership in Crisis

The role of leadership in Jesuit higher education extends beyond administrative functions and policy execution. It requires leaders to act as stewards of the institution's mission, integrating Jesuit values into decision-making processes at all levels. This

approach to leadership, often referred to as mission-centered governance, shapes institutional responses to both routine challenges and moments of crisis (Lowney, 2003).

The COVID-19 pandemic tested this leadership model in unprecedented ways. University leaders faced difficult trade-offs between financial sustainability, public health mandates, and institutional integrity. Decision-making during this period required pragmatism and a deep commitment to Jesuit principles, ensuring that the institution's core values were not compromised in the pursuit of short-term solutions (Benedetti, 2021).

Jesuit institutions emphasize a set of mission-driven decision-making frameworks that serve as guiding principles for leaders navigating complex challenges:

- *Cura Personalis*: This concept, which translates to "care for the whole person," underscores the responsibility of institutional leaders to consider the wellbeing of students, faculty, and staff in all decisions. During COVID-19, this principle was particularly relevant in discussions around mental health resources, remote learning accommodations, and policies affecting students' personal and academic lives (Kolvenbach, 2007).
- *Cura Apostolica*: Complementing *Cura Personalis*, *Cura Apostolica* refers to the responsibility of leaders to care for the institution itself, ensuring its long-term sustainability and effectiveness in fulfilling its mission. This principle became especially salient during the pandemic as institutions faced financial shortfalls, enrollment uncertainties, and shifting operational priorities (Garanzini & Souza, 2020).

- *Magis*: This Ignatian principle encourages individuals and institutions to strive for excellence and to seek the greater good. In crisis leadership, *Magis* compelled leaders to go beyond merely maintaining operations and reimagine how their institutions could emerge stronger, more equitable, and more committed to their mission (Lowney, 2003).
- *Discernment* is a structured approach to decision-making that emphasizes reflection, ethical consideration, and the balancing of competing priorities. Discernment was critical for Jesuit institutions as they weighed in-person versus remote instruction factors, budget allocations, and equity concerns in their pandemic response (Traub, 2017).

The pandemic required Jesuit leaders to apply these principles actively, ensuring that institutional responses aligned with Jesuit education's foundational mission. As leaders navigated the uncertainties of COVID-19, they continually returned to these mission-driven frameworks, demonstrating the enduring relevance of Jesuit values in times of crisis.

The Changing Landscape of Jesuit Leadership

Historically, Jesuit priests predominantly led Jesuit colleges and universities, serving as presidents, administrators, and faculty members. However, demographic shifts in the Society of Jesus have led to an increasing reliance on lay leadership. Between 1987 and 2022, the number of Jesuits in North America declined from 5,500 to just over 2,000, requiring greater involvement of lay leaders—both men and women—in sustaining and advancing Jesuit higher education (Jesuits, 2022).

Today, lay presidents, provosts, and senior administrators are entrusted with upholding Jesuit traditions, even if they did not have formal Jesuit formation earlier in their careers. To address this transition, institutions have invested in programs that educate lay leaders in Jesuit identity, such as the Ignatian Colleagues Program and mission formation retreats for faculty and staff (Garanzini & Souza, 2020). The challenge of maintaining mission-driven leadership amidst changing institutional structures underscores the importance of intentional formation and education in Jesuit values.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, lay and Jesuit leaders were called upon to navigate complex decisions while ensuring their institutions remained faithful to their Ignatian identity. The ability to integrate Jesuit decision-making principles into crisis leadership strategies became a distinguishing factor for institutions that sought to uphold their mission in the face of uncertainty.

The Jesuit approach to higher education is more than a philosophical foundation—it is a living tradition that actively shapes leadership and decision-making. The COVID-19 pandemic tested Jesuit institutions' ability to maintain their mission while responding to an unprecedented crisis. By applying principles such as *Cura Personalis*, *Cura Apostolica*, *Magis*, and Discernment, Jesuit leaders ensured that their institutions remained places of intellectual rigor, social responsibility, and ethical leadership, even under the most challenging circumstances.

As Jesuit colleges and universities evolve, the lessons learned from the pandemic will inform future approaches to leadership, crisis management, and mission integration. Jesuit institutions' ability to remain resilient and mission-driven in times of uncertainty

reinforces their enduring commitment to forming leaders who not only seek knowledge but also strive to serve others in the pursuit of justice and the common good.

Higher Education Decision Making in Time of Crisis

Crises create an environment of uncertainty, where leaders must navigate rapidly shifting circumstances, incomplete or conflicting information, and significant institutional pressures. In higher education, decision-making is typically a deliberate and structured process guided by policies, shared governance, and institutional mission. However, during a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic, leaders were required to make high-stakes decisions in compressed timeframes, often with limited data and competing stakeholder interests (Chorley, 2012). Adapting decision-making frameworks in these contexts was critical, particularly for Jesuit institutions, where leaders had to uphold mission-driven values while responding pragmatically to operational challenges.

Scholars categorize decision-making into two primary frameworks: **normative** and **descriptive** models. These frameworks provide a helpful lens to analyze how university leaders approached decision-making during the pandemic.

Normative vs. Descriptive Decision-Making

Decision-making literature distinguishes between normative approaches, which prescribe how decisions should be made based on rational models, and descriptive approaches, which examine how decisions are made in practice, acknowledging real-world complexities and limitations (Baron, 2008; Beaucells & Katsikopoulos, 2011).

- **Normative Decision-Making** follows a structured, logical approach. It assumes that leaders act rationally by weighing all available evidence, evaluating possible outcomes, and selecting the most optimal solution

(Gilbert, 1957). This model assumes that decision-makers have complete information and align their actions with predetermined objectives, such as an institution's mission or strategic plan. Normative theories benchmark how decision-making should occur under ideal conditions (McFadden, 2001).

- **Descriptive Decision-Making** explores how individuals make decisions, considering the influence of cognitive biases, external pressures, and competing priorities (Beaucells & Katsikopoulos, 2011). This framework recognizes that decision-makers often operate in uncertain conditions, where emotions, heuristics (mental shortcuts), and institutional politics shape choices (Jagtap & Gurao, 2016).

In a crisis scenario, leaders must often blend both models—seeking to uphold ideal, mission-aligned decision-making while simultaneously responding to unpredictable challenges that demand quick, pragmatic action. For Jesuit institutions, this tension was particularly pronounced, as leaders worked to uphold *cura personalis* (care for the whole person) and *cura apostolica* (care for the institution) while making difficult financial, operational, and ethical decisions under pressure (Kolvenbach, 1992).

Navigating Decision-Making During COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic provided a real-world case study of the interplay between normative and descriptive decision-making. In theory, institutions should have been able to rely on existing governance structures and strategic planning to guide their response. However, the sheer scale and unpredictability of the crisis meant that many traditional decision-making models proved insufficient.

University leaders were required to make decisions on:

- **Campus closures and reopening policies**, balancing public health guidance with institutional financial realities.
- **Remote and hybrid learning models** ensure educational continuity and equitable access to resources.
- **Student support services**, including expanded mental health resources and emergency financial aid.
- **Faculty and staff policies** include vaccine mandates, job security, and workload distribution.
- **Institutional financial strategies**, addressing tuition adjustments, housing refunds, and operational sustainability.

Each of these decisions carried competing priorities and trade-offs. For example, while some leaders saw tuition discounts as a mission-aligned effort to support students in financial distress, others recognized that such measures could threaten long-term institutional viability (Chorley, 2012). Similarly, decisions around vaccine mandates and classroom policies required balancing public health best practices with political and legal considerations, particularly at faith-based institutions navigating questions of religious exemption (Schreiber & Ludeman, 2020).

A key challenge for Jesuit leaders was ensuring that their decision-making process remained aligned with Jesuit values, even in moments of crisis. While descriptive decision-making required flexibility and adaptation, leaders who leaned solely on short-term pragmatism risked compromising institutional identity and trust. As Kolvenbach (1989) argues, "If an institution is to continue in the Ignatian tradition, then all members

of the higher education community must work together to affect the university's life and the developing Ignatian tradition." This principle became especially relevant during the pandemic, as leaders were called upon to integrate Ignatian discernment into their crisis responses.

The Role of Bias, Emotion, and Institutional Culture

While normative decision-making suggests that leaders operate rationally and systematically, research on crisis decision-making indicates that emotions, biases, and institutional culture often play an outsized role in shaping choices (Jagtap & Gurao, 2016). These factors were particularly evident during the pandemic, as leaders contended with:

- **Cognitive Biases:** Decision-makers relied on heuristics (mental shortcuts) to process large amounts of information quickly, sometimes leading to overreliance on early pandemic data or disproportionate responses to emerging risks (Morelli, Casagrande, & Forte, 2022).
- **Emotional Influences:** Fear, anxiety, and fatigue shaped decision-making, particularly as leaders struggled with the psychological toll of prolonged crisis management (Jagtap & Gurao, 2016).
- **Institutional Culture and Stakeholder Pressures:** A university's preexisting governance structures, stakeholder expectations, and risk tolerance influenced how leaders made decisions. Institutions with strong faculty governance traditions, for example, often encountered greater resistance to administrative mandates, whereas more centralized decision-making structures were able to implement policies more swiftly (Schreiber

& Ludeman, 2020).

The Jesuit Approach to Crisis Decision-Making

For Jesuit institutions, decision-making during COVID-19 required an intentional application of mission-aligned frameworks. Leaders drew upon principles such as:

- **Discernment** – Engaging in structured, reflective decision-making, balancing competing needs while ensuring alignment with mission.
- ***Cura Personalis*** – Centering decisions on the wellbeing of students, faculty, and staff, even amid financial pressures.
- ***Cura Apostolica*** – Taking a long-term, strategic view of institutional sustainability, ensuring that short-term crisis responses did not undermine the broader Jesuit mission.
- ***Magis*** – Striving to make decisions based on survival, excellence, and the greater good (Kolvenbach, 1992).

Decision-Making as a Balancing Act

The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the complexity of decision-making in higher education, particularly for mission-driven institutions balancing ethical commitments with operational realities. While normative decision-making provides an ideal framework for rational, mission-centered leadership, the unpredictable nature of crisis environments often necessitates descriptive, adaptive approaches that recognize uncertainty, stakeholder pressures, and emotional influences.

Jesuit leaders faced the challenge of integrating their values-based leadership tradition with real-world institutional constraints. As this study explores, the effectiveness of their responses depended not only on how well they adapted to crisis conditions but

also to what extent they preserved the core principles of Jesuit education in their decision-making processes.

Decision Premises

Foundational premises shape institutional priorities and guide leadership choices, influencing decision-making in higher education. A combination often informs these premises of financial, operational, and ethical considerations, particularly in times of crisis. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, institutional leaders had to navigate competing decision-making frameworks, balancing business-oriented corporate decision premises with mission-driven, values-based approaches.

For Jesuit-affiliated institutions, this tension became particularly pronounced as leaders upheld Ignatian spirituality's ethical and social justice commitments while striving to maintain institutional stability in a rapidly evolving and financially uncertain environment. The ability to reconcile these competing priorities—financial sustainability and mission integrity—became a defining challenge for Jesuit higher education leadership during the pandemic.

Corporate Decision-Making Premises

As complex organizations, universities operate within a financial and regulatory framework that necessitates strategic planning, resource allocation, and risk management. While higher education institutions are mission-driven by nature, they must also function as businesses, making decisions that ensure their long-term viability

Corporate decision-making premises in higher education include:

- **Financial Sustainability and Budgetary Constraints** – Leaders must ensure institutions remain financially solvent, balancing operational costs, tuition

revenue, and institutional expenditures (Hearn, 2015). The pandemic exacerbated financial instability, forcing institutions to make difficult choices regarding budget reductions, hiring freezes, and program closures (Fuchs-Schündeln et al., 2020).

- Risk Management and Legal Compliance – Universities are subject to legal and regulatory requirements, including labor laws, public health mandates, and accreditation standards. Compliance with federal and state directives regarding COVID-19 testing, vaccination policies, and remote learning protocols shaped institutional decision-making (Eaton, 2020).
- Enrollment Trends and Market Competition – Institutional leaders monitor demographic shifts, student demand, and competitive positioning to ensure financial viability. The pandemic disrupted enrollment patterns, with declining international student numbers, shifting student preferences, and increased financial aid demands presenting new challenges (Bastedo et al., 2016).
- Stakeholder Expectations – Universities are accountable to a diverse array of stakeholders, including trustees, donors, faculty, students, and alumni. Effective institutional decision-making necessitates balancing these competing interests while maintaining credibility and trust. The COVID-19 pandemic intensified pressures on university leaders to justify decisions regarding tuition, online learning, and campus safety protocols. Research suggests that aligning stakeholders' interests in the strategic planning process enhances organizational value (Tight, 2020). Additionally, surveys

conducted by the American Council on Education revealed that college and university presidents faced significant challenges in addressing student mental health and adapting to online learning during the pandemic (American Council on Education, 2020).

While these corporate premises provide a necessary framework for institutional operations, they often present tensions in mission-driven institutions, particularly those committed to student-centered and ethically grounded leadership models.

Jesuit Decision-Making Premises

In contrast to corporate decision-making, Jesuit institutions operate under a framework that prioritizes values-based leadership, social responsibility, and ethical discernment. Rooted in Ignatian spirituality, decision-making in Jesuit higher education emphasizes the pursuit of justice, holistic care, and the greater good over purely financial or operational considerations (Kolvenbach, 1999).

Key Jesuit decision-making premises include:

- **The Common Good and Social Justice** – Jesuit institutions are committed to advancing equity and justice in education. Decisions must reflect a responsibility to serve marginalized communities, support students in financial distress, and ensure institutional actions align with broader ethical obligations (Gallagher, 2021).
- ***Cura Personalis* (Care for the Whole Person)** – Rooted in Ignatian pedagogy, Jesuit institutions emphasize individualized care for students, faculty, and staff. This philosophy extends beyond academic support, encompassing mental health, financial assistance, and personal wellbeing,

particularly in times of crisis (Lowney, 2003).

- *Cura Apostolica* (Care for the Institution and Mission): Jesuit leaders balance individual needs with the institution's long-term sustainability. While addressing immediate financial and operational concerns, leaders must uphold the institution's Jesuit identity and ethical commitments (Traub, 2008).
- *Magis* (The Pursuit of Excellence and the Greater Good) – Jesuit institutions prioritize continuous improvement and ethical leadership. Decisions should address immediate concerns and consider their long-term implications for institutional mission, academic quality, and social impact (Byron, 2010).
- Discernment in Decision-Making – A distinct feature of Jesuit leadership, discernment involves thoughtful reflection, consultation, and ethical reasoning in decision-making. Unlike rigid corporate models, Jesuit decision-making integrates reflection and dialogue to balance competing priorities (Traub, 2017).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Jesuit institutions faced complex challenges that required balancing mission-driven commitments with financial and operational constraints. Leaders had to ask: How can institutions uphold their commitment to social justice while making budget cuts? How do they maintain student-centered support when faced with declining revenue? How can they sustain long-term mission integrity while navigating short-term public health demands?

Reconciling Corporate and Jesuit Decision-Making Premises in a Crisis

The COVID-19 pandemic heightened the inherent tensions between corporate and mission-driven decision-making in Jesuit institutions. While universities had to make financially responsible decisions, they also had to ensure that their actions aligned with their Jesuit values. The pandemic raised critical questions about maintaining institutional mission while navigating financial hardship.

Some institutions found ways to merge corporate and Jesuit premises, using innovative approaches to uphold both financial sustainability and mission integrity. For example:

- Several Jesuit institutions expanded financial aid and emergency student support while simultaneously implementing cost-cutting measures in other areas (Gallagher, 2021).
- Some universities prioritized furloughs over layoffs, ensuring that affected employees retained health benefits and had opportunities for reemployment (Fuchs-Schündeln et al., 2020).
- Many institutions framed their COVID-19 policies through the lens of social responsibility, emphasizing community wellbeing over individual preferences in their communication strategies (Lowney, 2003).

While financial realities demanded attention, some institutions that explicitly prioritized mission-driven decision-making took steps to lessen negative impacts, such as maintaining student support services or preserving employee benefits despite financial constraints. Studies on institutional responses (e.g., Gallagher, 2021; Fuchs-Schündeln et al., 2020) suggest that aligning financial decisions with mission values helped institutions

navigate challenges while upholding their commitments to Jesuit education. Additionally, Lowney (2003) emphasizes that effective leadership in Jesuit institutions requires balancing strategic decision-making with ethical and mission-driven considerations, a principle that guided some universities' responses during the crisis. The pandemic reinforced the importance of leadership frameworks integrating strategic and ethical considerations. Jesuit institutions that successfully balanced these competing premises demonstrated that financial sustainability and mission integrity are not mutually exclusive but rather interdependent elements of effective leadership.

As higher education continues to evolve in the post-pandemic era, the lessons learned from decision-making during COVID-19 will shape future institutional strategies. Jesuit institutions must continue to navigate the intersection of corporate realities and mission-driven commitments, ensuring that financial sustainability does not come at the expense of ethical leadership and social responsibility. By embracing the principles of discernment and *Cura Personalis*, Jesuit universities can continue to model a leadership approach that is both pragmatic and deeply rooted in mission.

COVID-19 Group Dynamics in Higher Education Decision-Making

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the complexity of decision-making in higher education, particularly in how institutions engaged and managed diverse stakeholder groups. University leaders were required to balance public health mandates, financial sustainability, academic continuity, and institutional mission—all while navigating the competing interests of students, faculty, staff, parents, alums, local communities, and government agencies. At Jesuit institutions, the challenge was even more significant, as leadership had to ensure that decision-making processes remained aligned with *cura*

personalis (care for the whole person), *cura apostolica* (care for the institution), and the broader Jesuit commitment to social responsibility (Kolvenbach, 1993).

Students were among the most vocal stakeholder groups during the pandemic, whose experiences and wellbeing were central to institutional responses. Many students advocated for extended remote learning options, expressing concerns about health risks and technological disparities. At the same time, there was a growing demand for mental health services, as students struggled with social isolation, financial hardships, and academic stress (Gallagher, 2021). Some students were also active in social justice movements, pushing institutions to address systemic inequities exacerbated by the pandemic, adding another layer of urgency to administrative decisions (Gover, et. al, 2020).

Faculty and staff also played a pivotal role in shaping decision-making. Professors, particularly those in scientific fields, often challenged administrative policies regarding in-person learning, advocating for more stringent safety measures. At the same time, faculty had to adapt quickly to online teaching, often with limited technological training and resources (Means et al., 2020). Staff members, especially those in student affairs, housing, and health services, were on the front lines of crisis response, directly enforcing safety protocols and managing student concerns. Many faculty and staff faced challenges, including increased workloads, financial insecurity, and health risks, making their perspectives essential to institutional decision-making (Gottenborg et al., 2021).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, parents and guardians expressed heightened concerns regarding tuition value, the quality of online learning, and campus safety. Many sought clearer communication from university leadership on issues such as tuition

adjustments, refund policies, and vaccine mandates (Milberg, 2020; Supiano, 2020). Institutions faced mounting pressure to justify tuition rates despite the shift to online learning, with some parents even pursuing legal action over what they perceived as a diminished educational experience (Busta, 2021; Milberg, 2020). At Jesuit institutions, where ethical leadership is a core value, university leaders had to carefully frame their decisions through the lens of mission and justice, ensuring that financial and safety policies reflected a commitment to student success rather than purely economic considerations (Santa Clara University, n.d.; Seattle University, n.d.).

The pandemic underscored the delicate balance between shared governance and the need for swift decision-making. Jesuit institutions, traditionally committed to inclusive, discernment-based leadership, faced challenges in maintaining extensive consultative processes amid rapidly evolving circumstances (Kezar & Holcombe, 2017). While some universities leaned into shared governance by forming faculty and student advisory committees, others found that bureaucratic delays made decisive action difficult, leading to tensions between administrators and faculty leaders (Bolman & Deal, 2021). Institutions that were able to pair ethical, transparent decision-making with clear and consistent communication were more successful in maintaining trust and engagement during the crisis.

The pandemic illuminated the intricate web of stakeholder relationships and competing interests defining higher education decision-making. Leaders at Jesuit institutions faced the dual challenge of responding to immediate crises while staying true to their long-term mission. Their ability to navigate these tensions—balancing student needs, faculty concerns, financial realities, and community expectations—demonstrated

the ongoing importance of mission-centered leadership in times of uncertainty. By engaging diverse voices, maintaining transparency, and reinforcing Jesuit values, institutions weathered the pandemic and strengthened their commitment to ethical leadership and social responsibility.

Leadership Theories Relevant to Jesuit Higher Education

Servant Leadership and Its Relevance to Jesuit Higher Education (Greenleaf, 1977)

Robert Greenleaf (1977) developed Servant Leadership as a philosophy that prioritizes serving others, making ethical decisions, and fostering followers' personal and professional growth. Unlike traditional hierarchical leadership models that emphasize authority and control, servant leadership centers on the idea that leaders exist to serve their communities, ensuring that the needs of individuals—especially the most vulnerable—are prioritized. This approach aligns closely with the Jesuit mission, particularly the principle of *Cura Personalis*—the care of the whole person—by fostering leadership that is people-centered, ethically grounded, and deeply invested in the wellbeing of students, faculty, and staff (Lowney, 2003).

Greenleaf (1977) argued that servant leaders focus on empowering others, nurturing a sense of community, and facilitating environments where people can thrive. This model holds particular relevance in Jesuit higher education, where leaders integrate mission and service into institutional decision-making. In times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, servant leadership becomes even more critical. Student Affairs professionals and senior university leaders have had to navigate an unprecedented set of challenges, from addressing student mental health concerns to ensuring financial and

operational stability, all while remaining faithful to their institutions' Jesuit identity (Spears, 1995).

Servant Leadership and Cura Personalis in Jesuit Institutions

One of the foundational tenets of Jesuit education is *Cura Personalis*, which calls for attention to the holistic development of individuals—their intellectual, emotional, spiritual, and physical well-being (Kolvenbach, 1993). Servant leadership naturally complements this Jesuit ideal by positioning leaders as stewards of individuals and the broader institutional mission. Rather than focusing solely on financial outcomes or administrative efficiency, servant leaders within Jesuit institutions strive to uphold the dignity of each person, ensuring that institutional decisions reflect a commitment to ethical leadership, social justice, and student-centered practices (Rega & Honen-Delmar, 2022).

For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, Jesuit leaders who embodied servant leadership principles made strategic choices that prioritized the wellbeing of students and staff, even when these decisions conflicted with financial or operational pressures. Many institutions expanded mental health resources, created emergency financial aid programs, and implemented flexible academic policies to support students facing uncertainty and hardship (Goh & Zhen-Jie, 2020). These actions illustrate how servant leadership within Jesuit institutions is not merely an abstract ideal but an actionable framework for leadership in times of crisis.

The Ethical and Mission-Driven Imperative of Servant Leadership

Jesuit universities operate within a larger framework of Catholic Social Teaching, which calls for leadership that upholds the common good, human dignity, and solidarity

with the marginalized (O'Brien, 2011). Servant leadership within Jesuit higher education reflects these commitments by ensuring that decisions are made not just with institutional survival in mind, but with an emphasis on ethical responsibility and care for all community members.

Servant leadership also fosters a culture of shared governance, encouraging leaders to listen actively, engage in dialogue, and incorporate the voices of diverse stakeholders in decision-making processes (Keith, 2010). This participatory approach was vital during the pandemic when students, faculty, and staff sought transparency and trust in leadership decisions. Leaders who engaged in open communication and demonstrated empathy—key attributes of servant leadership—were more likely to sustain institutional morale and community cohesion in a time of crisis (Eva et al., 2019).

Long-Term Implications of Servant Leadership in Jesuit Institutions

The continued application of servant leadership in Jesuit higher education ensures that institutions remain resilient, adaptable, and mission-driven. While financial stability and strategic planning remain essential, servant leadership underscores that the ultimate measure of an institution's success is its fiscal health and ability to form ethical leaders, promote justice, and serve the greater good (Lowney, 2003).

By integrating the principles of *Cura Personalis*, ethical leadership, and social responsibility, servant leadership provides a model for Jesuit institutions to navigate current and future challenges while remaining steadfast in their commitment to education as a means of transformation and service.

Adaptive Leadership in Jesuit Higher Education (Heifetz et al., 2009)

The Adaptive Leadership framework, developed by Heifetz et al. (2009), provides a model for leading organizations through complexity, uncertainty, and change. Unlike traditional leadership models emphasizing authority and control, adaptive leadership prioritizes flexibility, innovation, and shared problem-solving, which is critical for navigating crises like the COVID-19 pandemic. This leadership approach is particularly relevant to Jesuit higher education, where institutional leaders must balance tradition with change, mission with sustainability, and moral imperatives with operational constraints (Heifetz et al., 2009).

At its core, adaptive leadership recognizes that technical and adaptive challenges require different approaches. Technical challenges present known problems with straightforward solutions, whereas adaptive challenges require leaders to navigate unfamiliar territory and discover solutions through learning and collaboration (Heifetz & Linsky, 2017). The COVID-19 pandemic presented adaptive challenges to Jesuit institutions, requiring leaders to reimagine how they delivered student services, maintained community engagement, and upheld their mission under extreme constraints.

Key Tenets of Adaptive Leadership in Crisis

1. **Navigating Uncertainty:** Adaptive leaders embrace ambiguity and develop evolving strategies. During COVID-19, Jesuit leaders could not rely on past crisis response models but instead had to continuously assess public health data, student needs, and financial realities to make informed, flexible decisions (Northouse, 2018).

2. **Engaging Multiple Stakeholders:** A defining characteristic of adaptive leadership is the engagement of diverse voices in decision-making. Jesuit institutions, committed to the values of *Cura Personalis* (care for the whole person) and *Cura Apostolica* (care for the institution as a whole), prioritized stakeholder involvement in their responses. Faculty, staff, students, and public health officials were all consulted in shaping policies that impacted learning environments, student support services, and campus safety (Bolman & Deal, 2021).
3. **Experimentation and Learning:** Adaptive leadership encourages a learning mindset, recognizing that crisis response is iterative rather than formulaic. Jesuit leaders had to test new approaches—such as remote student engagement, virtual mental health services, and revised governance models—while remaining open to adjusting strategies based on real-time feedback (Heifetz et al., 2009).
4. **Mission-Driven Adaptation:** While all higher education institutions faced significant challenges during the pandemic, Jesuit institutions approached these challenges through a mission-centered lens. Adaptive leaders within Jesuit higher education sought to maintain a balance between practical crisis response and the preservation of Jesuit values. This balance meant ensuring that financial sustainability efforts did not come at the expense of student wellbeing, faculty support, or social justice commitments (Lowney, 2003).

Adaptive Leadership and Jesuit Higher Education in Crisis

The COVID-19 pandemic tested the adaptability of Jesuit institutions. Leaders had to decide whether to prioritize in-person learning, adopt hybrid models, or move entirely online, ensuring students felt academically, socially, and spiritually supported. Some institutions adopted incremental changes to campus policies, while others made sweeping transformations in how they approached student support, faculty governance, and community engagement.

Through an adaptive leadership lens, Jesuit institutions demonstrated that strategic flexibility strengthens mission-driven resilience, not weakens it. By embracing collaborative decision-making, experimentation, and stakeholder engagement, leaders were able to navigate crises without compromising the core values of Jesuit education. Thus, the application of adaptive leadership in Jesuit higher education serves as a model for future crises, demonstrating how institutions can remain agile, ethical, and mission-focused despite unprecedented challenges (Heifetz et al., 2009; Lowney, 2003).

Transformational Leadership (Burns, 1978; Bass, 1985)

Transformational leadership emphasizes vision-driven change, institutional resilience, and the ability to inspire and motivate stakeholders to align with a greater purpose. Unlike transactional leadership, which focuses on maintaining systems and exchanging rewards for performance, transformational leadership seeks to create meaningful and mission-driven change by fostering innovation, developing followers into leaders, and cultivating a sense of shared purpose (Burns, 1978; Bass, 1985).

For Jesuit higher education leaders, transformational leadership is particularly relevant. It aligns with the Ignatian tradition of educating individuals to be "Men and

Women for and with Others," fostering personal and institutional growth while addressing contemporary societal challenges. Transformational leadership is about responding to crises and leveraging those crises as opportunities for institutional reflection, innovation, and a renewed commitment to mission (Bass & Riggio, 2006).

Key Elements of Transformational Leadership in Jesuit Institutions

Mission-Driven Change: Transformational leaders in Jesuit institutions integrate mission-centered decision-making into institutional strategies, ensuring that change aligns with core Jesuit values such as *Cura Personalis*, *Magis*, and a commitment to social justice (Lowney, 2003). Leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic had to make difficult decisions about health policies, financial priorities, and student engagement, all while ensuring that institutional actions reflected their Jesuit identity.

Institutional Resilience and Sustainability: A central tenet of transformational leadership is building resilience within an organization to survive challenges and emerge stronger (Bass, 1999). For Jesuit universities, this meant maintaining financial sustainability while upholding student-centered policies and ethical governance. Transformational leaders navigated institutional restructuring, faculty engagement, and student support systems, ensuring that short-term crisis management did not undermine long-term institutional stability.

Visionary Leadership and Stakeholder Engagement: Transformational leaders inspire and engage their institutions by articulating a compelling vision and motivating stakeholders to commit to a shared future (Northouse, 2021). Jesuit leaders faced with uncertainty during the pandemic needed to rally faculty, staff, and students around a collective mission that balanced financial viability with social responsibility. Through

transparent communication and ethical leadership, transformational leaders align all institutional decisions with the values of justice, equity, and holistic education.

Leadership as a Catalyst for Growth and Innovation: Rather than simply maintaining the status quo, transformational leadership encourages institutions to evolve, adapt, and innovate (Avolio & Bass, 2004). Jesuit leaders leveraged this crisis as an opportunity to rethink student services, redesign academic delivery models, and reinforce community engagement efforts. The pandemic accelerated the adoption of digital learning platforms, expanded mental health and wellbeing resources, and deepened institutional conversations on racial justice and equity—all of which reflected a transformational approach to leadership.

Transformational Leadership in the Context of COVID-19

During the COVID-19 pandemic, transformational leadership was crucial in guiding Jesuit institutions through unprecedented challenges. Leaders were tasked with balancing financial constraints, shifting public health mandates, and the needs of students and faculty, all while preserving the mission of Jesuit higher education. Those who adopted a transformational approach were able to:

- Maintain institutional identity by grounding decisions in Jesuit values.
- Engage faculty, staff, and students in shared governance to ensure inclusive decision-making.
- Adapt and innovate in response to evolving challenges without compromising the university's long-term mission.
- Foster trust and resilience within the institutional community through transparent and ethical leadership.

While transformational leadership provided a crucial framework for Jesuit higher education leaders navigating the crisis, its application was not without challenges. Some institutions faced tensions between financial sustainability and mission integrity, particularly when faculty resisted in-person learning or when lower-paid staff bore the brunt of in-person work while administrators worked remotely. Inconsistent implementation of transformational leadership across divisions sometimes created disparities in decision-making power and resource allocation. Despite these tensions, institutions that effectively integrated mission-driven leadership with strategic adaptability were better positioned to uphold Jesuit values while responding to the crisis. These experiences underscore the importance of balancing transformational leadership ideals with the realities of organizational constraints and stakeholder tensions.

Crisis Leadership (Boin et al., 2017)

Crisis leadership is a critical framework for understanding how institutional leaders navigate high-pressure situations that require rapid decision-making, effective communication, and adaptive governance. Boin et al. (2017) define crisis leadership as the ability to manage uncertainty, mitigate risks, and maintain institutional trust during times of disruption. Their model identifies key leadership responsibilities in a crisis, including sense-making, decision-making under pressure, meaning-making, and accountability—all essential for university leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Decision-Making Under Pressure

Crises necessitate high-stakes decision-making under extreme pressure. The COVID-19 pandemic required university leaders to make urgent decisions regarding campus closures, remote learning, vaccine policies, and student support services, all

while facing incomplete or conflicting information (Boin et al., 2017). These decisions had immediate and long-term consequences, influencing financial stability, student success, and institutional credibility. Jesuit leaders faced the challenge of integrating mission-driven priorities into their crisis response, balancing *cura apostolica* (care for the institution) with *cura personalis* (care for the individual).

Traditional decision-making models often assume access to precise data and sufficient time for deliberation, yet crises demand adaptive, real-time decision-making. At Jesuit institutions, shared governance structures further shaped this process by fostering inclusivity while sometimes slowing response times (Kezar & Eckel, 2004). Leaders had to balance efficiency and stakeholder engagement, ensuring that key decisions remained transparent and aligned with Jesuit values.

Meaning-Making and Institutional Trust

Beyond operational decisions, crisis leadership also involves meaning-making or the ability to frame institutional responses to reassure stakeholders and reinforce core values (Boin et al., 2017). During the pandemic, Jesuit university leaders frequently emphasized mission-aligned themes in official communications. For example, Creighton University President Rev. Daniel S. Hendrickson, SJ, underscored Jesuit ideals of solidarity and care for the vulnerable when announcing campus closures intended to protect community health (KETV, 2020). Similarly, communications from Loyola University Chicago's Office of the President consistently linked institutional responses to Ignatian values, emphasizing community responsibility and care during COVID-19 (Loyola University Chicago, 2020). By aligning institutional responses with Jesuit ideals,

leaders could cultivate a sense of purpose and collective responsibility among students, faculty, and staff (Traub, 2017).

However, meaning-making was not just about rhetoric—it required actionable commitments to student wellbeing, faculty support, and financial equity. Institutions that backed up their messaging with mission-driven policies—such as expanded financial aid, mental health resources, and inclusive governance processes—fostered greater institutional trust than those that relied on top-down decision-making without broad stakeholder engagement (Bolman & Deal, 2021).

Accountability and Crisis Recovery

Finally, crisis leadership necessitates accountability, particularly during disruptive events (Boin et al., 2017). University leaders had to take responsibility for the outcomes of their decisions, whether related to public health policies, financial trade-offs, or campus reopening strategies. Effective crisis leadership involves reflecting on successes and failures, identifying lessons learned, and using that knowledge to strengthen future institutional resilience.

At Jesuit institutions, accountability also extended to ethical leadership and social justice commitments. Many institutions found themselves at the center of national debates about vaccine mandates, racial justice, and student mental health—issues that required leaders to demonstrate transparency, moral clarity, and responsiveness to stakeholder concerns (Gallagher, 2021). The Jesuit emphasis on self-reflection and discernment provided a valuable framework for this process, encouraging leaders to assess institutional responses and seek continuous improvement critically.

Crisis Leadership and the Jesuit Tradition

The intersection of crisis leadership and Jesuit higher education underscores the importance of mission-driven resilience. While secular institutions may have approached crisis decision-making primarily from a risk-management perspective, Jesuit universities uniquely framed their responses through the lens of mission, ethics, and community care. The pandemic challenged Jesuit institutions to maintain their institutional identity amid unprecedented disruptions. Leaders at these institutions applied core crisis leadership principles—sense-making, decision-making under pressure, meaning-making, and accountability (Boin et al., 2017; Traub, 2017)—to adapt to uncertainty while upholding foundational Jesuit values. For instance, Jesuit universities implemented tangible, mission-driven policies such as expanding financial aid to vulnerable students, ensuring job security for staff, and bolstering mental health resources for the campus community (Loyola University Chicago, 2020; Creighton University, 2020). These actions demonstrated a clear commitment to Ignatian principles of social justice, *cura personalis* (care for the whole person), and solidarity, evidencing that institutional identity remained integral to crisis response rather than merely rhetorical. The pandemic tested the capacity of Jesuit leaders to uphold their institutional identity while navigating unprecedented challenges.

Summary

This chapter has reviewed literature on decision-making in higher education, crisis leadership, and Jesuit mission-driven governance. It has explored key leadership frameworks—Servant Leadership, Adaptive Leadership, Transformational Leadership, and Crisis Leadership—that provide a lens for understanding how Jesuit-affiliated

institutions responded to the COVID-19 pandemic (Greenleaf, 1977; Heifetz et al., 2009; Burns, 1978; Boin et al., 2017). Additionally, it examined normative and descriptive decision-making models, contrasting corporate decision premises prioritizing financial sustainability and legal compliance with Jesuit decision premises emphasizing social justice, ethical stewardship, and institutional mission (Beaucells & Katsikopoulos, 2011; Simon, 1976). The intersection of these decision-making frameworks was particularly evident in the group dynamics of pandemic leadership, as institutional leaders sought to balance the often-competing expectations of students, faculty, staff, parents, local communities, and governing bodies (Schneider & Council, 2021).

Through this study, Jesuit student affairs executive leaders will offer insight into how mission-aligned leadership played a role in institutional decision-making during COVID-19. Their experiences will provide a deeper understanding of how leaders negotiate tensions between financial realities and mission-based commitments, navigate crises with agility, and sustain institutional integrity in uncertain times. These findings will contribute to the broader discourse on leadership in higher education, offering practical applications for future crises and reaffirming the relevance of Jesuit leadership principles in contemporary university governance. The next chapter will outline the qualitative methodology used to examine these leadership approaches, detailing the research design, data collection, and analytical strategies guiding this study.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

The proposed study aims to explore how eight Student Affairs executive leaders in Jesuit-affiliated higher education institutions describe their decision-making processes during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, it examines how participants describe the relationship between mission-informed decision-making and the institutional responses their colleges and universities implemented. Through their accounts, the study seeks to understand how these leaders balanced Jesuit mission principles and business-related considerations while navigating the challenges of the pandemic. By analyzing their experiences, this research will provide insight into how mission-driven governance shaped decision-making during a crisis.

The study focused on Jesuit colleges and universities because of their shared mission-based framework and distinctive Ignatian tradition, particularly their emphasis on discernment in decision-making. While many Catholic and Christian institutions operate with mission-driven objectives, Jesuit institutions have a long-established practice of integrating Ignatian discernment, *cura personalis* (care for the whole person), and *cura apostolica* (care for the institution's mission) into leadership and governance (Kolvenbach, 1992). Additionally, the 27 Jesuit institutions in the U.S. represent a distinct cohort with a common heritage, providing a valuable sample for understanding how mission-driven decision-making operates in practice. This study explores the decision-making processes of Student Affairs executive leaders within Jesuit institutions to identify how mission-based decision premises influenced crisis responses during the COVID-19 pandemic. While these institutions share a strong commitment to Jesuit values, they also face business-related objectives, financial constraints, and regulatory

compliance pressures. Examining decision-making in these contexts offers insights into how institutional leaders balance mission and operational realities. This study highlights participants' perceptions of how Jesuit values influenced institutional responses to crisis. While organizational themes will emerge, the study remains focused on capturing how leaders navigated decision-making processes within the constraints of their institutional realities.

The backdrop of this research is the significant disruptions that reshaped higher education due to the COVID-19 pandemic. These disruptions altered instructional modes, campus life, institutional finances, and strategic priorities, requiring university leaders to make critical and time-sensitive decisions (Kim & Maloney, 2021). While the pandemic catalyzed rapid change, it also exacerbated existing challenges in higher education, including financial pressures, enrollment fluctuations, and shifts in student support needs (Gallagher, 2021). This study focuses on how decision-making processes within Jesuit institutions responded to these disruptions, particularly within Student Affairs divisions. Rather than attempting to examine all facets of higher education change, the study will analyze decision-making through the perspectives of Student Affairs executive leaders who played a pivotal role in institutional responses. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with participants to explore their lived experiences, decision-making rationales, and reflections on balancing mission-oriented and business-driven priorities during the pandemic. Data will then be coded and thematically analyzed to identify common patterns in how Jesuit values influenced crisis response strategies. The disruptive impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on universities has been transformative, and its repercussions are likely to

reshape institutional priorities for years to come (Means et al., 2020). Investigating decision-making within Jesuit institutions provides insight into how mission-based organizations navigate crises, balance operational and ethical responsibilities, and adapt to unprecedented challenges.

Central to this study is the recognition that Jesuit institutions' missions play a pivotal role in guiding their decision-making processes. By examining the student affairs divisions within these institutions, the research aimed to understand how Jesuit values and traditions extended beyond rhetoric and actively shaped decision-making. The Student Affairs lens offered a unique vantage point, as these divisions were central to supporting students' holistic development and wellbeing. Since its formalization in The Student Personnel Point of View (American Council on Education [ACE], 1937), the field of Student Affairs has emphasized the integration of student learning, personal development, and institutional mission as central to higher education (ACE, 1949).

The study's emphasis on mission-informed decision-making and its role in shaping business-related outcomes serves as a lens to understand how institutions navigate and respond to disruptive organizational changes. The focus is exploring how mission-informed decision-making relates to and contributes to formulating operation decisions, creating a dynamic interplay that shapes institutional responses to challenges. Through this investigation, the study aims to uncover valuable insights that extend beyond the immediate challenges posed by the pandemic.

Research Question

The COVID-19 pandemic created short-term disruptions and provoked long-term changes in how the world lives and does business (Mckinsey, 2022). This seismic change

put many planned business changes, such as departmental reorganizations and cultural changes, in the back seat, rendering these changes as nice-to-have and the response to COVID-19 as a need-to-have. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic presented institutions with extraordinary challenges, forcing them to make swift and complex decisions to ensure the safety of their communities, transition to remote learning, and navigate financial uncertainties. From reimagining traditional instructional methods to implementing stringent health protocols, institutions faced many dilemmas that demanded agile decision-making to address the multifaceted impacts of the global health crisis. These various decisions created the decision-making framework analyzed by this research.

The following research questions guided this qualitative study:

- What decision premises did executive leaders of Jesuit-affiliated student affairs divisions report were part of their decision making to address COVID -19 challenges?
- How did executive leaders of Jesuit-affiliated student affairs divisions apply corporate decision premises or mission related decision premises to university decisions during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Method

The research employed a qualitative, phenomenological approach, using individual interviews with executive student affairs leader to explore their shared experiences and perspectives. By capturing firsthand narratives, the study seeks to illuminate how participants interpret and make sense of their experiences within the context of Jesuit higher education. These accounts provided insights that enabled the

researcher to examine the underlying patterns and meanings embedded in participants' shared experiences, offering a deeper understanding of the factors that shaped decision-making and organizational responses (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Through this interpretive process, the study revealed themes that can inform leadership strategies, policy considerations, and future research on the role of mission-informed decision-making in navigating complex challenges.

Research Design Overview

Employing a phenomenological approach rooted in the qualitative research methodology outlined by Creswell and Poth (2018) was particularly apt for gaining in-depth insights into the lived experiences, practices, and policies within the context of Jesuit-affiliated higher education institutions. As a research framework, phenomenology seeks to explore the essence of experiences and the meanings individuals attribute to them. This study's phenomenological lens focused on exploring the decision-making processes that student services administrators undertook during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This approach allows for a nuanced understanding of how mission-informed decision-making interfaces with broader organizational dynamics, shedding light on the lived realities and perspectives of those involved in navigating the complex landscape of higher education during times of significant disruption. Phenomenological research is a qualitative research approach that centers on appreciating and exploring the lived experiences of individuals. The goal of phenomenological research is to uncover the essence or nature of a phenomenon as the participants report it without imposing preconceived theories or frameworks. The study aims to explore the reported decision-making processes and perspectives of a representative sample of executive leaders within

the 27 United States-based Jesuit-affiliated higher education institutions who navigated the challenges posed by the disruptive organizational change brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The research will employ a hermeneutic phenomenological design to guide data collection, analysis, and reporting, challenging preconceived notions to uncover rarely discussed experiences (Crowther et al., 2016). The hermeneutic approach highlights hidden content about the human experience, allowing for closer examination and meaning-making (Spielgelberg, 1982). In this study, participants shared their decision-making experiences during the pandemic.

This phenomenological exploration, guided by Creswell (2018), addressed participants responses during the COVID-19 pandemic (generally spanning 2019–2022, with some lasting effects beyond this period), exploring executive leaders' intricate decision-making processes and perspectives amidst disruptive organizational changes. Embracing a qualitative design is appropriate for addressing the research question, especially in areas where the lived experiences of executive leaders within these institutions remain unexplored (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

Participants

The participant sample comprised eight student affairs executives, each representing a different Jesuit institution. The selection process prioritized individuals who held senior leadership roles in student affairs during the COVID-19 pandemic and were involved in institutional decision-making related to student support, campus operations, and crisis response. The study examined how these executives perceived their

roles and responsibilities during this period, recognizing the influence of multiple stakeholders with varying levels of authority and impact on institutional decision-making. By gathering firsthand accounts from these leaders, the study examined how student affairs perspectives contributed to, shaped, or challenged the broader institutional decision-making structures.

Participant Recruitment

The study recruited participants through a clearly structured, step-by-step process. Initially, the researcher obtained permission and support from the President of the Jesuit Association of Student Personnel Administrators (JASPA), a national organization representing student affairs professionals at Jesuit institutions, to facilitate communication with senior administrators at member institutions. Institutions included in the study were purposefully selected based on criteria such as geographic diversity, institutional size, and representation within the Jesuit network.

Once institutional permission was secured, the researcher directly contacted senior student affairs administrators at selected Jesuit institutions. Recognizing that administrative titles vary across institutions, the researcher clearly outlined participant-selection criteria in the communication, emphasizing roles directly involved in decision-making regarding student support, campus life, and crisis management during the COVID-19 pandemic. These detailed criteria were provided in the initial invitation and attached as an appendix (appendix F) to ensure transparency and clarity.

Administrators who received this communication were asked to provide referrals for potential participants meeting these criteria. Subsequently, referred administrators were contacted individually by the researcher and invited to participate based on their

direct involvement in institutional pandemic response efforts, thus ensuring relevance and targeted participation.

Participant Selection

This study focused on senior student affairs executives within Jesuit higher education institutions who were actively involved in decision-making during the COVID-19 pandemic. Given the variation in institutional structures and leadership assignments during this time, the study included individuals formally designated to lead pandemic-related decision-making within student affairs, regardless of their exact titles. This approach recognized that institutional responses varied and that different leaders may have overseen critical decisions related to student support, campus operations, and public health measures. The selection process prioritized a diverse and representative sample by considering institutional factors such as size, financial and enrollment stability, and geographic location, as these elements likely influenced decision-making more than individual demographic characteristics.

While the study sought to include a broad range of perspectives, it primarily selected executives based on their direct involvement in institutional decision-making related to student affairs and their ability to provide insight into how mission-driven and business-related considerations shaped institutional responses during the pandemic.

Additionally, this study sought to recruit a diverse pool of participants by remaining open to leaders from various backgrounds and identities. However, participant selection did not explicitly focus on demographics such as gender; rather, the primary criterion was each individual's professional role and direct involvement with pandemic-related decision-making in student affairs. Specifically, the recruitment process

prioritized executives who actively shaped, implemented, or oversaw institutional policies and initiatives during the pandemic. By using these inclusive yet role-focused selection criteria, the study aimed to capture diverse institutional experiences, providing a nuanced understanding of how Jesuit higher education institutions navigated the challenges of COVID-19 through student affairs leadership.

Data Collection

This study explored the lived experiences of student affairs executives at Jesuit institutions, focusing specifically on their decision-making processes during the COVID-19 pandemic. Data was collected through Zoom interviews with eight participants representing institutions across the United States.

Data Collection Process

In qualitative research, trustworthiness is essential to ensuring that findings accurately reflect participants' experiences and perspectives. As defined by Lincoln and Guba (1985), trustworthiness consists of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, which served as guiding principles for this study's data collection process. This study employed a structured, step-by-step approach to gathering data to align with these principles.

The first step in this process was securing approval from Creighton University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) to ensure that all research procedures complied with ethical guidelines and protected participant rights. Once the IRB approved the study, see Appendix G, the researcher initiated participant recruitment by contacting the Jesuit institution SSAOs. As noted above, this initial outreach requested nominations of executive leaders who were directly involved in institutional decision-making during the

COVID-19 pandemic. A formal solicitation email, Appendix B, introduced the study, outlined participation criteria, and provided an overview of confidentiality and informed consent procedures.

The participating executive leader from the Jesuit-affiliated higher education institution received an email requesting their participation in this research study, which included one 60-minute one-on-one interview. All names of identified and participating executive leaders were stored in a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet on a password-protected personal cloud drive and updated as data was collected. Following this systematic and ethically sound approach, the study collected rich, in-depth narratives that captured the complexities of executive decision-making in Jesuit higher education institutions during the pandemic.

Upon completing the selection process, the researcher scheduled one-on-one Zoom interviews with each participant. Once participants scheduled a 60-minute interview with the researcher, they received a confirmation email containing the link to the Zoom meeting room. This email included the Participant's Bill of Rights (Appendix A), the letter of consent (refer to Appendix D), and a copy of the interview questions (refer to Appendix E).

The researcher served as the sole interviewer via Zoom (Zoom.com). Zoom's capabilities were utilized for video chat and session recording to capture participant's responses to open-ended questions. During each one-on-one interview, the session was recorded via Zoom while the researcher took notes to aid in the data collecting. This approach enabled recording details and contexts that may not have been captured in the transcript but held significance for the study. After the interviews, the researcher

reviewed the recorded Zoom sessions for accuracy, jotting down initial notes encompassing key participant comments.

Data Collection Tools

This study was conducted with one-on-one interviews via Zoom (Zoom.com) with executive participants who volunteered for the study based on recommendations from the vice presidents at the 27 United States-based, Jesuit-affiliated higher education institutions. One-on-one interviews was the first step in gathering information from the executive COVID-19 decision-makers. This interview structure allowed the researcher to ask consistent questions to each participant, gathering insight into the decision-making influences during the COVID-19 pandemic. This structure allowed the researcher to gather basic information about participants' experiences without the influence of others in the study.

Data Analysis

In a phenomenological inquiry, researchers seek to understand and interpret individuals' lived experiences to gain deeper insight into how they perceive and make sense of those encounters (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher's objective was to explore how executives within Jesuit institutions constructed meaning around their decision-making processes amid the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. To capture the complexities and nuances of these experiences, the researcher used open-ended questions to gather pertinent data (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

During data analysis, the study first ensured participants' anonymity by assigning pseudonyms and non-identifying labels to all written records. The analysis then focused on identifying recurring themes and patterns reflective of participants' accounts. Initial

codes captured salient concepts or noteworthy expressions. Through an iterative process, codes were refined and grouped into broader categories and ultimately into themes (D'Andrea et al., 2011). This coding process enabled the identification of commonalities and variations in participants' experiences. Additionally, the researcher employed the qualitative analysis software MAXQDA to enhance the efficiency and rigor of the coding process. The resulting codebook served as a foundation for subsequent interpretation, contributing to a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to rigorous ethical standards to protect participants and uphold research integrity, emphasizing informed consent, participant confidentiality, secure data management, and researcher reflexivity. Before participating, the researcher fully informed individuals of their rights, the study's purpose, potential risks, and the expected use of their data. Before the interviews, the researcher emailed participants a Formal Social Behavioral Informed Consent Form and a Bill of Rights for Research. Participants reviewed and acknowledged these documents before proceeding.

Participation was voluntary, with individuals retaining the right to decline questions or withdraw without penalty. Ensuring complete anonymity was challenging, given the small participant pool and leadership turnover in Jesuit institutions. Although the study used pseudonyms, the visibility of institutional roles could have led to indirect identification. The researcher removed personally identifiable details from reports, aggregated findings where possible, and stored all data securely in a password-protected cloud drive, accessible only to the researcher. The researcher restricted identifying details to the dissertation committee.

Since phenomenological research acknowledges that researchers bring prior experiences to their work (Creswell & Poth, 2018), it is essential to remain aware of potential biases that could shape data collection and analysis. Given the researcher's direct experience in Jesuit institutions' COVID-19 responses, the study employed bracketing to set aside personal experiences and maintain focus on participants' narratives. Methodological transparency ensured that the findings remained participant-driven rather than researcher-influenced. The researcher securely stored all interview recordings and transcripts in a password-protected cloud drive, coding and de-identifying the data to ensure that only they had direct access to raw interview content. MAXQDA software was used to organize and manage the qualitative data, supporting the researcher's efforts to maintain systematic and transparent coding practices throughout the analysis process. By implementing these ethical safeguards, the study upheld the highest standards of trustworthiness and participant protection, ensuring that findings accurately reflected the experiences of student affairs executives in Jesuit institutions.

Summary

This chapter described the qualitative phenomenological approach used to examine how student affairs executives at Jesuit institutions navigated decision-making during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study specifically explored participants' interpretations of their experiences in balancing mission-informed values and operational considerations during this unprecedented crisis.

Data collection procedures began with Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, followed by structured participant recruitment through the Jesuit Association of Student Personnel Administrators (JASPA). The sample included senior administrators

directly involved in pandemic-related decisions, who participated in semi-structured, one-on-one Zoom interviews designed to elicit detailed reflections.

Analysis involved qualitative coding and thematic analysis, utilizing MAXQDA software to organize and support systematic identification of patterns in participant narratives. Throughout the study, researcher reflexivity and bracketing were employed to mitigate potential biases, and ethical practices—including informed consent, confidentiality, and secure data storage—were consistently prioritized. Given the limited participant pool and leadership turnover within Jesuit institutions, the data was carefully de-identified to minimize indirect identification risks.

By centering on participants' descriptions and interpretations of their mission-informed decision-making, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how Jesuit institutions balance core institutional values with operational realities during times of disruption. The insights gained offer valuable perspectives for higher education leaders navigating decision-making in mission-driven organizations, especially amid crisis and change.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS AND FINDINGS

This chapter presents the results of a phenomenological study examining how executive leaders at Jesuit-affiliated higher education institutions navigated decision-making during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly regarding the interplay between mission-driven values and corporate considerations. The study answers the following research questions:

1. What decision premises did executive leaders of Jesuit-affiliated student affairs divisions report were part of their decision-making to address COVID -19 challenges?
2. How did executive leaders of Jesuit-affiliated student affairs divisions apply corporate decision premises or mission-related decision premises to university decisions during the COVID-19 pandemic?

The study involved interviews of eight executive leaders from Jesuit institutions in the United States. The participants represented a diverse range of roles, institutional sizes, and regional contexts, ensuring a broad perspective on how Jesuit values shaped leadership decisions during the COVID-19 crisis. Data was collected over five months via semi-structured virtual interviews using Zoom and analyzed using thematic coding in alignment with the phenomenological approach described in Chapter 3.

As discussed in Chapter 2, existing literature emphasizes that decision-making in mission-driven institutions, particularly those guided by Ignatian principles, is influenced by organizational values, leadership frameworks, and external pressures. This study builds upon that foundation by examining leaders in this study's accounts of how they personally navigated ethical dilemmas, balanced stakeholder interests, and implemented

crisis responses—highlighting the ways their decisions aligned with, or at times diverged from, their institutions' stated missions.

This research revealed specific themes and decision-making patterns that illustrate the dual pressures of adhering to Jesuit values, such as *cura personalis* (care for the whole person), and responding to operational challenges, such as budget constraints, staff furloughs, faculty resistance, and changing public health mandates. These findings provide insight into leadership during crises and offer practical suggestions for mission-driven institutions navigating similar challenges in the future.

This chapter includes the following sections: (1) participants, (2) instrumentation and data collection, (3) results, and (4) discussion. The findings draw directly from participants' accounts, contextualized through illustrative quotes. They build upon the foundation established in Chapters 1, 2, and 3, offering rich insights into institutional mission-informed leadership during a global crisis.

Participants

Participants were eight executive leaders at Jesuit-affiliated higher education institutions across the United States, selected through purposeful sampling. Participants represented diverse roles, institution sizes, and geographic locations. Each was specifically chosen based on their executive-level responsibilities and direct involvement in institutional decision-making during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Participant Roles

Participants, including vice presidents, deans, and assistant provosts, occupied senior leadership positions. Their responsibilities spanned strategic planning, student engagement, student health and counseling, facility management, and crisis response.

These roles placed them at the forefront of institutional decision-making during the pandemic, particularly in addressing challenges such as implementing safety protocols, balancing budgets, and supporting student wellbeing.

Institutional Contexts

The participating institutions varied in size, regional location, and focus. While all institutions adhered to Jesuit principles, some were large urban universities with robust resources, while others were smaller institutions operating with more constrained budgets. This variation gave a comparative perspective on how institutional context influenced leadership decisions. For example, participants from smaller institutions frequently reported challenges in maintaining financial stability, whereas those from larger universities emphasized stakeholder management and public relations.

Demographic Overview

Table 1 provides an overview of participant demographics. The participant demographics reflect diverse experiences, institutional settings, and professional responsibilities. Participants' experience varied from 12 to 25 years, ensuring that the study captured insights from seasoned leaders and those navigating their first major crisis. The sample maintained a gender balance, with equal representation of male and female participants. Institution size varied evenly across the sample: 25% of participants represented large institutions (10,000 or more students), 25% represented medium-large institutions (7,000–9,999 students), 25% were from small-medium institutions (4,001–6,999 students), and the remaining 25% came from small institutions (fewer than 4,000 students). The sample included participants from diverse geographic regions, with 50% from the East and 25% each from the West and Central regions. This distribution reflects

the broader landscape of Jesuit higher education in the United States, where over half of the institutions are located in the Eastern region. All participants served as senior student affairs administrators, offering perspectives grounded in leadership and decision-making at their respective institutions.

Table 1

Participant Demographic

Baseline characteristics	<i>n</i>	%
Gender		
Female	4	50.0
Male	4	50.0
Institution Size (by Student)		
Large (10,00 or more)	2	25.0
Medium—Large (7,000 – 9,999)	2	25.0
Small—Medium (4,001 – 6,999)	2	25.0
Small (fewer than 4,000)	2	25.0
Institutional Endowment Size (by dollars)		
More than \$1B	3	37.5
\$200M - \$1B	2	25.0
Less than \$200M	3	37.5
Institutional Region		
West	2	25.0
Central	2	25.0
East	4	50.0
Institutional Setting		
Urban	5	62.5
Suburban	3	37.5
Institutional Control		
Private	8	100
Religious Affiliation		

Jesuit	8	100
Carnegie Classification		
Doctoral/Research	3	37.5
Master’s Colleges & Universities	3	37.5
Baccalaureate Colleges	2	25.0

Note. N=8. Participants all held Senior Student Affairs Administrator Roles with various titles.

Instrumentation

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight (8) executive leaders at Jesuit-affiliated higher education institutions to collect data for this phenomenological study. These interviews explored how mission-driven and corporate decision premises informed decision-making during the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the geographic distribution of participants, the researcher conducted virtual interviews primarily through Zoom (zoom.us). The platform enabled video and audio recording, ensuring accurate data collection while providing participants with a convenient and flexible option.

Participants were recruited exclusively via email using purposeful sampling. Recruitment emails outlined the study's purpose, confidentiality protocols, and participation requirements and included the following documents:

- The Participant’s Bill of Rights (see appendix A)
- Social Behavioral Informed Consent Form (see appendix D)

These documents fully informed the participants about the study's scope, participants' rights, and expectations regarding the use of the data.

The interview protocol, appendix E, included open-ended questions and encouraged participants to share their perspectives. The study design elicited narrative

responses reflecting participants' lived experiences with decision-making during the pandemic. The researcher asked follow-up and clarifying questions to capture and ensure the participant's narrative fully. This approach allowed for authentic and dynamic dialogue, as Milne and Oberle (2005) suggested. The researcher transcribed the interviews using Zoom's automated transcription feature and manually corrected them to ensure accuracy.

All identifiable information and participant data were anonymized to maintain confidentiality and securely stored in compliance with research standards. MAXQDA (maxqda.com), a qualitative analysis software, was utilized to assist in the organization and analysis of the data. MAXQDA enabled the coding and categorization of data, facilitating the identification of themes and patterns across interviews.

Data Analysis

As described in Chapter 3, the data analysis followed an iterative phenomenological approach to ensure the themes emerged directly from the participants' experiences. This process involved several steps, aligning with the study's phenomenological framework.

Step 1: Review of Recordings and Transcripts

The analysis began with a review of the Zoom recordings and their corresponding transcripts. Each recording was listened to multiple times, enabling the researcher to immerse themselves in the data and develop an initial understanding of the participants' narratives. This step was crucial for contextualizing the data before coding, as Braun and Clarke (2006) and Vaismoradi et. al. (2013) recommended.

Step 2: Transcription and Anonymization

The researcher manually reviewed and corrected the automated transcription generated by Zoom to ensure accuracy. Participants' names and identifying details were replaced with pseudonyms during this stage to maintain anonymity. This step was vital for upholding confidentiality and protecting the privacy of participants.

Step 3: Coding in MAXQDA

Using MAXQDA, transcripts were analyzed line by line to identify recurring words, phrases, and concepts. Initial codes were assigned to specific text segments, focusing on elements relevant to the research questions, such as decision-making frameworks, ethical tensions, and stakeholder dynamics. The researcher organized these codes into larger categories and subcategories that reflected patterns in the data.

Step 4: Theme Development

Codes and categories were synthesized into broader themes, aligning with the research questions and the study's conceptual framework. Through this process, overarching themes such as "Balancing Mission and Business-Oriented Decisions" and "Stakeholder Alignment" emerged from the data, providing a lens through which to interpret participant's accounts. These themes highlight the complexities of decision-making in Jesuit institutions during the COVID-19 pandemic, capturing tensions between financial sustainability and mission-driven commitments, the roles of stakeholders, and the institutional responses to crisis management.

The analysis identified nine themes.

Table 2

Theme Development

Theme	Variable explanation
Mission vs. Business Tensions	Conflicts between financial sustainability and Jesuit values in decision-making.
Health & Safety Protocols	Institutional responses to public health guidelines, policy enforcement challenges, and evolving COVID-19 mandates.
Faculty Resistance	Faculty pushback against in-person instruction mandates, hybrid learning policies, and administrative directives.
Student Support & Well-being	Institutional efforts to provide financial, academic, and emotional support to students during the pandemic.
Stakeholder Alignment	Challenges in balancing competing interests of students, faculty, administrators, and external health experts.
Decision-Making Frameworks	The structures and processes used for crisis decision-making, including governance models and expert consultation.
Jesuit Mission Integration	How Jesuit principles (<i>Cura Personalis, Magis</i>) influenced institutional policies and leadership decisions.
Resource Allocation	Distribution of financial, technological, and health-related resources during the crisis.
Crisis Communication	Transparency, effectiveness, and consistency in institutional messaging during rapidly changing conditions.

The themes identified in this study were derived from qualitative analysis of participant interviews, reflecting the lived experiences reported by executive leaders at Jesuit-affiliated institutions during the COVID-19 pandemic. These themes emerged through thematic coding, highlighting key tensions, decision-making frameworks, and institutional responses that shaped leadership practices during the crisis.

Step 5: Validation and Refinement

To ensure consistency and credibility, the researcher revisited the data multiple times to refine codes and themes. This iterative process helped confirm that the findings were grounded in the participants' narratives.

Ensuring Rigor and Synthesizing Themes

The researcher employed various strategies to validate the findings and ensure the data analysis process remained trustworthy and aligned with the study's research objectives. Notes were maintained throughout the process, documenting coding decisions, thematic development, and analytic processes to enhance transparency. The data was revisited multiple times during the analysis to refine codes, confirm patterns, and ensure that themes aligned with participants' narratives and the research questions. Additionally, the themes were synthesized by organizing participant responses with interview questions and then identifying recurring ideas across questions. The researcher integrated these patterns into themes that captured the complexity of decision-making during the COVID-19 pandemic, providing insights into the challenges of decision making.

Reflections on the Data Analysis Process

Given the phenomenological nature of this study, the analysis focused on understanding the participants' accounts of their decision-making during the pandemic. Their stories, decisions, and reflections were central to identifying themes and providing insights into the interplay between mission-driven and business-related decision-making. The study revealed that decision-making was not strictly business-related or mission-driven but rather a negotiation between the two.

For Jesuit institutions, the COVID-19 pandemic reinforced the value of mission-driven leadership, even as financial and operational constraints complicated decision-making. These findings offer practical insights for Jesuit leaders, emphasizing inclusive governance, transparent communication, and a renewed commitment to institutional values

Results

The COVID-19 pandemic presented unprecedented challenges for executive leaders interviewed at Jesuit-affiliated institutions. They were required to make complex decisions that addressed financial sustainability, public health mandates, faculty and student needs, and their institutions' core mission-driven values. This study examined how leaders navigated this delicate interplay between operational realities and the Jesuit tradition, focusing on decision-making frameworks.

Through semi-structured interviews with eight senior leaders, nine key themes emerged, reflecting the primary areas of concern, tension, and adaptation during this time. These themes provide insight into how leaders at Jesuit institutions navigated financial and ethical dilemmas during the pandemic. Based on participants' reflections, those who leaned into their Jesuit mission described experiencing greater resilience, stakeholder trust, and institutional stability. In contrast, participants who emphasized short-term financial considerations or conventional risk-management approaches often shared accounts of increased tension, misalignment, or missed opportunities. The findings also highlight the importance of transparent communication, inclusive decision-making, and adaptability as institutions worked to uphold *Cura Personalis* (care for the

whole person) and *Cura Apostolica* (care for the institution as a whole) while navigating a rapidly changing landscape.

The following section provides a detailed discussion of the nine themes identified in the study, incorporating participant quotes and analysis to illustrate the challenges, strategies, and leadership lessons that emerged during the pandemic.

Theme 1: Mission vs. Business Tensions

Participants described how their Jesuit institutions faced significant challenges in balancing financial sustainability with their commitment to mission-driven education during the COVID-19 pandemic. Leaders navigated difficult decisions regarding tuition refunds, employee benefits, and operational budgets while striving to uphold institutional values. Arrupe, a leader from a large, urban, eastern institution described tensions surrounding financial trade-offs, stating,

“We did not furlough anybody, we did not reduce health care benefits...but we temporarily suspended the retirement match, which was controversial. I was the only one in the Cabinet who voted against it because I knew we could make up the revenue.”

This decision, later reversed when unexpected housing revenue materialized, reflects the institutional struggle between short-term financial pragmatism and long-term mission commitments. Similarly, Laínez, a leader from a small-medium, suburban, eastern institution highlighted the ethical considerations behind issuing housing refunds despite financial strain, explaining,

“When everyone went home in March of 2020, we had to refund all their residential experiences. That’s a financial decision that had to be made,

recognizing it could put the institution behind financially. But it was not fair for us not to give that money back—it was the right thing to do.”

To mitigate financial burdens while preserving core Jesuit principles, some institutions created new solutions. Láinez described the development of a Student Support and Relief Fund to assist financially vulnerable students, noting,

“A core principle was caring for students with the greatest need. One mission-driven initiative was the creation of a Student Support and Relief Fund to assist students facing financial hardship. We secured donations to help students with internet access, transportation, and living expenses when families faced job losses. This initiative directly supported marginalized students, ensuring they had the resources needed to continue their education.”

Ricci, a leader from a medium-large, urban, western institution in a similar approach, leveraged local partnerships to sustain employment for university staff:

“Rather than cut positions, we worked with local health agencies to offer temporary employment to staff members who would have otherwise been furloughed. Some staff worked in vaccination clinics or contact tracing efforts. It wasn’t perfect, but it helped keep people working and aligned with our mission of public service.”

These examples illustrate how institutions sought to uphold mission-aligned values through external collaborations and alternative funding mechanisms rather than resorting to mass layoffs or severe budget cuts.

However, not all institutions navigated this balance seamlessly. Leadership tensions emerged as some administrators prioritized financial stability while others

argued for maintaining full employee benefits and student services. Arrupe recalled internal conflicts with financial officers who advocated for immediate layoffs:

“There were finance people who wanted layoffs immediately. They saw a crisis as an opportunity to ‘reset’ financially. I argued that this was short-sighted—if we furlough staff now, how do we rebuild a sense of trust later? It was a fight.”

Kolvenbach, a leader from a large, urban, eastern institution further emphasized the challenges of sustaining financial obligations while maintaining fairness to employees, stating,

“We refused to implement mass furloughs, but it wasn’t easy. We had to freeze hiring, cut salaries for new hires, and reallocate resources just to stay afloat. Some board members felt we were being too generous, but we believed it was the ethical decision.”

These tensions demonstrate the competing pressures of ensuring financial solvency while remaining faithful to the Jesuit commitment to *cura personalis*.

Institutional size and geographic location further influenced how financial trade-offs were handled. Arrupe noted the complexities of managing external governmental regulations and a large, diverse student body, while Nadal, from a small eastern suburban institution, described existential concerns about long-term survival, explaining,

“We weren’t just managing a financial setback—we were trying to figure out if we could stay open long-term. Unlike larger schools, we didn’t have millions in reserves. Our mission told us to put students first, but we also had to ensure we still had a university to return to after the crisis.”

These varied responses highlight the institution-specific nature of financial sustainability efforts. While all institutions faced economic uncertainty, the extent of financial flexibility, administrative decision-making, and access to external resources shaped how they navigated the balance between fiscal responsibility and mission fidelity.

Theme 2: Health and Safety Protocols

One of the most immediate and complex challenges institutional leaders faced during the COVID-19 pandemic was navigating rapidly evolving public health guidelines while maintaining the continuity of campus operations. The shifting landscape of mask mandates, social distancing requirements, vaccine policies, and quarantine procedures required constant adaptation and decision-making in alignment with Jesuit institutional values. Leaders had to balance institutional autonomy with external mandates, ensuring that policies were both practical and mission-driven. Arrupe reflected on the challenge of implementing health and safety protocols in an uncertain environment, explaining,

“We did our best to follow the science, but at the same time, we had to be realistic about what it takes to keep a university running. Not everyone agreed with every decision, and we definitely faced some pushback. But we kept coming back to the need for consistency and clear communication. Even if people didn’t like the policy, they needed to understand it—and trust where it was coming from.”

This need for clear and consistent communication was a common theme across institutions, as leaders recognized that transparency played a key role in fostering trust and compliance. Láinez emphasized the importance of open forums with the provost, sharing,

“[The open forums] gave us a chance to be really transparent about what was going on. We could speak plainly, answer questions, and make sure people understood not just what we were doing, but why—how it all tied back to our mission and values.”

Similarly, Ricci highlighted the role of faith in guiding difficult decisions, explaining,

“We acted in faith that doing the right thing would ultimately yield the best outcome... that is a leap of faith, that is, that takes some courage and conviction to do that. I give our President a ton of credit.”

These reflections underscore how mission-centered communication strategies helped leaders foster trust and navigate institutional uncertainty.

Health and safety measures were not solely logistical challenges; they were also ethical and mission-driven decisions. Leaders bore the responsibility of protecting the well-being of students, faculty, and staff while ensuring that the educational experience remained effective. Institutions approached this challenge in different ways, with some adopting strict enforcement strategies while others relied on education and community accountability. Laínez described a mission-driven approach to health and safety efforts, stating,

“The weekly testing, the random testing—it was all based on caring for the community, which is Cura Personalis at its heart. But what made it truly mission-driven was that our own students administered the tests, supervised by faculty volunteers. It became an act of service.”

This example highlights how some institutions embedded Jesuit values directly into health protocols, transforming safety measures into experiential learning opportunities that reinforced the mission of service and education.

Despite institutional efforts, leaders frequently encountered resistance to health mandates from various stakeholders. Faculty, staff, students, and external community members expressed diverse and often conflicting perspectives on COVID-19 policies. Some faculty and students advocated for strict mandates, whereas others viewed such measures as an infringement on personal freedoms or a disruption to the educational environment. Nadal explained,

“Local government officials and neighborhood groups pressured us to go beyond state requirements. At one point, we sanctioned [took disciplinary action against] a student gathering of 11 people, even though the real issue was the off-campus parties of 60+ students. The inconsistency in enforcement created frustration.”

This tension between public health guidance, community pressures, and institutional autonomy complicated decision-making and required leaders to navigate policies with both flexibility and resolve.

The success of health and safety policies was often tied to the effectiveness of institutional communication strategies. Those who provided regular updates, hosted virtual town halls, and engaged stakeholders in decision-making experienced higher trust and compliance. Bellarmine, a leader from a medium-large, suburban, western institution emphasized this point, explaining,

“We held monthly Zoom meetings with the provost and senior leadership. They were open forums where faculty and staff could ask anything—even the tough

questions. And honestly, that was the point. We knew not everyone would like the answers, but what mattered most was being transparent and showing that we weren't making decisions behind closed doors."

In contrast, institutions that reported a lack of clear and proactive communication reported greater pushback, misinformation, and confusion. At Kolvenbach's institution, public health directives were enforced rigidly without sufficient engagement from student affairs professionals. Kolvenbach recalled,

"We had a policy limiting gatherings to 10 people... I recall a graduate student gathering of 11 people being sanctioned, despite efforts to socially distance and follow protocols... Meanwhile, we encountered off-campus gatherings of 60+ students... but both were treated with equal severity."

This overly stringent and inconsistent approach, driven largely by public health experts with limited understanding of higher education, led to diminished reported trust and strained campus morale.

Ultimately, institutions that framed health and safety measures through the Jesuit principles of *Cura Personalis* (care for the whole person) and commitment to the common good found greater alignment between public health mandates and institutional mission. Leaders who positioned safety policies as a shared responsibility rather than an administrative directive observed higher levels of engagement and adherence. Ricci summarized this approach, stating,

"We kept reminding our community that these weren't just a bunch of rules—we were asking people to live our values. Caring for one another wasn't new; it's always been part of who we are. COVID just brought that into sharper focus"

This mission-driven framing helped some institutions overcome resistance and foster a sense of collective purpose, reinforcing that health and safety measures were not simply about compliance, but about living out Jesuit ideals of social justice, care, and community responsibility.

Theme 3: Faculty Resistance

One of the most persistent challenges institutional leaders faced during the COVID-19 pandemic was faculty resistance to administrative directives, particularly regarding the return to in-person instruction. While leadership prioritized reopening campuses to restore the traditional learning environment, many faculty members advocated for continued remote learning, citing concerns over health risks, pedagogical adjustments to virtual instruction, and a lack of institutional transparency. This tension led to deep divisions between faculty and administration, requiring careful negotiation and transparent communication. Arrupe described the difficulty of balancing institutional priorities with faculty concerns, explaining,

“One major battle was over the return to in-person instruction. Faculty, particularly those in scientific fields, often disagreed with administrative decisions. Many faculty members wanted remote options extended indefinitely. Leadership, however, was committed to returning to in-person education, as it was core to the institution’s mission.”

This perspective reflects an underlying institutional belief that the Jesuit tradition—rooted in community-building, direct engagement, and holistic personal formation—was best experienced in person.

However, faculty perspectives on returning to campus were not monolithic. Many instructors preferred remote teaching due to personal health concerns, caregiving responsibilities, or the stability that online instruction provided after months of adaptation. Faber, a leader from a small, urban, central institution described how faculty in certain disciplines required additional flexibility, noting,

“Faculty in fields like laboratory sciences and performing arts faced unique challenges. Some needed hybrid models because their courses couldn’t be replicated online, while others resisted any return to campus because they had adapted to remote instruction.”

Similarly, Borgia, a leader from a small-medium, urban, central institution emphasized that some faculty felt they were being forced back into the classroom too quickly, without enough assurances about safety measures, stating,

“For some faculty, it wasn’t about refusing to come back—it was about feeling like the decision was made without their voices being heard. They wanted clearer guarantees about ventilation, distancing, and masking policies.”

This resistance was not just about health and safety but also highlights concerns about shared governance, as many participants in the study reported faculty believed administrative decisions were being made unilaterally.

Institutional leadership varied in how faculty input was incorporated into return-to-campus policies. Some universities engaged faculty in advisory committees to shape protocols, while others issued top-down mandates that led to greater faculty pushback.

Nadal described the importance of transparency and dialogue, explaining,

“We established a faculty working group early on. The goal was to avoid the perception that decisions were being imposed. While we didn’t always agree, giving faculty a voice helped ease tensions.”

In contrast, Bellarmine recalled a different experience at an institution where faculty input was largely absent, stating,

“Faculty had no real seat at the table. Faculty were informed of decisions but not invited to shape them. That led to resistance—not because faculty were unwilling to return, but because they felt disregarded.”

This variation in governance approaches directly influenced faculty compliance and trust, highlighting the importance of collaborative decision-making in crisis management.

To balance faculty concerns with institutional priorities, some institutions implemented phased return plans, hybrid teaching options, or extended accommodations for high-risk faculty members. Ricci noted that offering flexibility without compromising mission alignment was key, explaining,

“We knew we couldn’t delay in-person instruction forever, but we also realized it wasn’t realistic—or ethical—to bring everyone back at the same time. So, we phased the return gradually and did our best to offer accommodations, especially for those with health risks or personal concerns. It was about balancing safety with educational integrity.”

These strategies helped rebuild faculty-administration relationships, allowing for greater faculty engagement in institutional recovery efforts.

According to participants, institutions that approached faculty resistance with transparency, flexibility, and a commitment to values aligned with the Jesuit tradition—

such as dialogue, discernment, and *cura personalis*—were better able to navigate these tensions. These approaches, as described in participant accounts, contributed to greater faculty engagement and trust during a period of significant uncertainty. Those that prioritized shared governance, inclusive decision-making, and active communication reported higher levels of faculty collaboration and trust. As Nadal summarized,

“At the end of the day, we had to balance mission with reality. The institutions that involved faculty early, listened to their concerns, and adapted where possible came out of this stronger.”

This finding reinforces the importance of balancing administrative priorities with faculty agency, ensuring that institutional recovery efforts remain both mission-driven and faculty-supported.

Theme 4: Student Support and Wellbeing

A defining characteristic of Jesuit education is its commitment to holistic student support, grounded in the principle of *Cura Personalis*—care for the whole person. This commitment was both tested and reinforced during the COVID-19 pandemic, as institutions confronted unprecedented challenges in addressing student mental health, financial insecurity, and academic disruptions. Institutional leaders worked to expand counseling services, increase financial aid, and implement flexible academic policies to mitigate the crisis’s impact on students. Ricci described the increased demand for mental health support, explaining,

“We started seeing a spike in student counseling needs pretty early on, especially as isolation and uncertainty took a toll. So, we shifted gears and expanded virtual

mental health services—teletherapy, and check-ins—anything we could do to meet students where they were.”

This adaptation of mental health services was echoed across multiple institutions as they recognized the growing psychological strain students faced due to isolation, academic burnout, and uncertainty about the future.

Financial hardship was another significant barrier to student wellbeing during the pandemic. Many students lost employment, experienced housing insecurity, or struggled with limited access to necessary technology for remote learning. In response, institutions established emergency financial aid programs, expanded food and housing assistance, and distributed laptops and internet access to students in need. Nadal described how their Jesuit institutions prioritized students in the most precarious situations, stating,

“We knew some students were really struggling, families had lost jobs, and the financial pressure was intense. So, we pulled together emergency funds to make sure students could stay enrolled. No one should have to drop out because of something beyond their control.”

Similarly, Laínez highlighted the moral imperative behind these efforts, explaining,

“It wasn’t just about making decisions on paper—we were asking, ‘What do students actually need to survive and succeed right now?’ Some didn’t have internet, so we found ways to get them connected. Others didn’t have enough to eat, so we made sure food was available. This was about living out our values, making sure no one got left behind just because their family was struggling.”

These interventions reinforced the Jesuit commitment to equity and social justice, ensuring that disadvantaged students were not disproportionately affected by the crisis.

Academic policies were also adapted to reflect the extraordinary pressures students were facing. Many institutions implemented:

- More lenient grading policies (pass/fail options, extended withdrawal deadlines)
- Flexible attendance requirements for students dealing with illness or personal crises
- Expanded tutoring and academic support services

Leaders emphasized that these changes were not simply short-term accommodations but reflected a deeper commitment to student wellbeing and success. Faber described how these academic adjustments were rooted in mission rather than mere convenience, stating,

“Jesuit education is about the formation of the whole person. That means adapting to circumstances while maintaining rigor. The goal was never to lower standards, but to ensure students had the support they needed to succeed.”

Similarly, Bellarmine emphasized the long-term impact of these changes, noting,

“The pandemic forced us to rethink student support. Some of the policies we introduced—more flexibility in coursework, expanded mental health training for faculty—are now permanent. It made us ask, why weren’t we doing this before?”

Some institutions even reported that these student-centered policies led to long-term discussions about embedding greater flexibility and support structures into Jesuit education beyond the pandemic.

Institutions that prioritized student wellbeing and crisis response reported increased student engagement, trust, and institutional loyalty. Borgia noted that these

actions not only addressed immediate student needs but also strengthened the sense of belonging on campus, stating,

“Students saw that we cared. We didn’t just send emails; we showed up with resources, with solutions. That mattered.”

Arrupe echoed this sentiment, adding,

“A crisis has a way of exposing the difference between mere performers and genuine leaders. It strips away pretense and reveals who is truly committed to the mission—those who step up when it matters most.”

Several participants described an alignment between institutional mission and crisis response at their respective campuses. This illustrates how some Jesuit universities navigated the tension between maintaining academic integrity and fostering community care during one of the most challenging periods in modern higher education

Theme 5: Stakeholder Alignment

One of the most reported complex challenges study participants faced during the COVID-19 pandemic was managing competing priorities among institutional stakeholders. Faculty, students, administrators, and external public health officials had differing—and at times conflicting—perspectives on campus policies, safety measures, and the institution’s operational direction. Notably, some of these tensions emerged even among mission-oriented decision makers, as individuals interpreted and prioritized institutional values differently in light of rapidly changing circumstances. Institutional leaders had to mediate these tensions while ensuring that decisions remained mission-aligned and responsive to evolving conditions. Bellarmine reflected on the difficulty of balancing multiple perspectives, stating,

“At times, it felt like we were negotiating between four different groups, each with its own set of concerns and expectations. The real difficulty wasn’t just in hearing every voice—it was in moving forward without becoming paralyzed by competing priorities.”

This reality required leaders to navigate a complex web of negotiations, balancing communication, compromise, and institutional priorities.

Faculty frequently voiced concerns about classroom safety, workload expectations, and academic freedom, while students expressed frustration over shifting policies on tuition, remote learning, and access to campus resources. Administrators were responsible for balancing financial pressures with evolving public health mandates, while external health officials often introduced new regulations requiring immediate institutional adjustments. Arrupe described the delicate balance between these competing interests, explaining,

“We were constantly navigating a shifting landscape of city, state, and federal regulations. I often had multiple monitors running—tracking infection rates, policy updates, and institutional guidance in real time. Every decision—whether about testing protocols, quarantine procedures, or vaccine mandates—was met with scrutiny. We committed to a nonpartisan, data-driven approach, guided by public health expertise rather than political pressures. For instance, we implemented monthly testing for all students and staff, and later, a vaccine mandate—both of which faced pushback from different corners of the community.”

Similarly, Ricci emphasized the difficulty of meeting stakeholder expectations, noting,

“We say we’re caring for the whole community, but then faculty were being asked to mask up and be in the classroom... not everybody loved that. Some folks didn’t want to be back in the classroom. ... We had students that were suffering, and I think we had to ask for mental health days and breaks and ask faculty to make exceptions that they wouldn’t make typically.”

These tensions made decision-making particularly challenging, requiring leaders to weigh competing needs while maintaining institutional mission and stability.

To address these challenges, some institutions formed advisory committees or task forces that incorporated faculty, student, and staff representation in decision-making. These collaborative structures helped build trust, increase stakeholder buy-in, and mitigate opposition to major policy changes. Arrupe explained the benefits of this approach, stating,

“I had an advisory council of student leaders that I would meet with monthly. We would get their feedback on things, and we would modify some practices based on that input. Even when people disagreed with decisions, they appreciated being heard. That feedback loop helped reduce tension and increased trust in the process.”

However, some leaders acknowledged that inclusivity often came at the cost of efficiency, as gathering input from multiple groups delayed critical decisions and created frustration among stakeholders expecting swift action. Borgia described this tension, explaining,

“There were times when we had to act quickly—especially with health and safety policies—but consensus-building takes time. Some decisions simply had to be made.”

Or Canisus added a comment about large decision-making groups stating,

“When we did have challenges... when these group meetings involved more people than we probably should have had in the structure, we’d be like, okay—is this contributing to the academic experience and the student experience? If the answer was no, then we didn’t do it.”

This dilemma illustrates the constant balancing act between consultation and decisiveness, particularly when urgent policy implementation was required.

Despite these challenges, participants who framed decision-making through the lens of Jesuit values—particularly discernment, collaboration, and the common good—found that, though difficult, stakeholder alignment was essential for institutional stability.

Kolvenbach reflected on the importance of transparency and communication, stating,

“We realized pretty quickly that if we communicated clearly and explained why we were doing what we were doing, we got more support. People might not like the decision, but they’d at least say, ‘Okay, I understand it.’ And that’s what builds credibility and long-term trust.”

Ricci echoed this sentiment, adding,

“What’s gonna work is students feeling they’re seen, heard, and valued in this process, and that we understand what we’re asking is difficult. That’s gonna cause us all to give a little.”

Institutions that maintained clear, open communication and engaged their communities in dialogue were better positioned to navigate these tensions, fostering resilience and strengthening institutional trust.

Theme 6: Decision-Making Frameworks

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, leaders relied on varied governance structures to navigate the uncertainty and implement policies that balanced safety, financial sustainability, and Jesuit mission-driven leadership. Task forces, advisory committees, faculty councils, and cross-functional leadership teams played central roles in shaping policies that sought to balance health and safety with financial sustainability and the Jesuit mission. While many leaders saw these governance structures as essential for ensuring broad representation and mission alignment, others found them to be a source of frustration, particularly when urgent decisions were needed. Nadal described this tension, explaining,

“We had a steering committee with 15 working groups and too many people... it just got bogged down, became cumbersome. Couldn't get anything done. There was representation—and you could argue for shared governance—but we got mired in indecision because there were many people pushing it in different directions.”

Despite the challenges of navigating competing interests, some leaders viewed shared governance as critical to ethical leadership and institutional stability. Arrupe reflected on the importance of broad participation, stating,

“It was essential to have diverse perspectives at the table—faculty, student affairs, finance. At times, it was frustratingly slow, but we knew that without broad representation, we’d be making decisions in a vacuum.”

Ricci echoed this sentiment, emphasizing the value of collaboration across multiple departments:

“Our response team included voices from every corner of campus—academic affairs, student affairs, public health experts, finance. It was messy at times, but it helped us stay true to our mission.”

These perspectives illustrate how many institutions prioritized a deliberative decision-making approach, even when it meant working through logistical challenges.

However, maintaining broad participation in governance structures sometimes complicated the ability to respond quickly to evolving public health mandates, financial pressures, and institutional needs. Arrupe described the difficulty of balancing inclusivity with efficiency, explaining,

“We ballooned from 8 working groups to... 13 or 14. I lose track. I wanted to keep the groups small to keep them nimble... We ended up with groups as large as 15 people. Representation and governance are important, but it can also bog the process down—especially if obstructionists get involved. It becomes more about them than about getting things done.”

Similarly, Borgia pointed out that while transparency and shared governance helped build trust, they sometimes delayed critical decisions:

“Every decision had to pass through multiple layers of approval, which sometimes meant we were behind the curve. But we believed that transparency and inclusion would pay off in the long run.”

These accounts underscore the complexity of decision-making in crisis situations, where institutional values had to be weighed alongside the need for rapid action.

To mitigate some of these challenges, several institutions adjusted their decision-making processes by introducing more structured frameworks. Faber explained how their institutional approach helped streamline operations:

“We worked very hard to stay aligned with one another... We really relied upon the task force, composed of leaders drawn from across the university. One of my key takeaways was recognizing the silos that can develop, even here. That advisory group was instrumental in breaking down many of those silos and fostering better collaboration.”

Others relied on clear decision-making protocols to balance responsiveness with stakeholder input. Faber described how this system worked at their institution, stating,

“We had three clear goals outlined by leadership: maintaining academic continuity, preserving the student experience, and upholding our institutional mission. Every decision we made had to tie back to those goals, providing a structured yet responsive framework during the crisis.”

These adaptations highlight the different ways institutions sought to uphold the values of shared governance while ensuring that critical decisions could still be made efficiently.

Although governance structures sometimes slowed responses, leaders widely acknowledged the importance of maintaining a mission-centered approach, even in

moments of crisis. Institutions that found a balance between broad consultation and timely action were better positioned to navigate challenges without compromising their Jesuit identity. These findings suggest that while inclusive decision-making fosters institutional trust and alignment, it must be paired with adaptability to ensure that ethical commitments and operational needs are upheld in times of uncertainty.

Theme 7: Jesuit Mission Integration

Despite the immense challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, participants at Jesuit institutions remained committed to their core mission and values, ensuring that decision-making reflected both individual well-being and institutional sustainability. The principles of *Cura Personalis* (care for the whole person) and *Cura Apostolica* (care for the institution) were central to governance, financial planning, and student support initiatives. According to participants, institutions that actively integrated these values into their decision-making frameworks appeared to emerge from the crisis more mission-aligned and deeply rooted in their identity.

Bellarmino reflected on this commitment, stating,

“We had transitions during the pandemic, yet despite this our decisions remained firmly rooted in our core mission. The clarity of our values kept our focus on student well-being and success throughout the crisis.”

This insight reflects a pattern described by several participants, who believed that maintaining a mission-first approach helped their institutions navigate operational and financial challenges while staying rooted in their core identity.

A key finding from participants was that mission alignment was not separate from financial or operational concerns; rather, it was an essential framework for navigating

uncertainty. Faber described how the leadership team used Jesuit values to guide decision-making, explaining,

“Mission was always front and center. Anyone in our leadership team had the freedom to challenge recommendations if they seemed inconsistent with institutional values. We rarely had to push back, but when we did, it was to balance individual care (Cura Personalis) with institutional needs (Cura Apostolica).”

Ricci similarly emphasized that Jesuit principles served as a foundation for institutional resilience, stating,

“I think anytime there are fears about safety, we tend to gravitate to the things that bind us together. In Jesuit communities, when facing hardships—racial injustices, natural disasters, or a pandemic—we return to our core values and perhaps focus on them more steadily than during easier times. I believe the pandemic drew us closer and deepened our commitment to mission. Our Jesuit charism and tradition, the values upon which our systems are built, have the ability to transcend technology, innovation, and modern developments. They represent a timeless strength that holds our community together and ensures we come out stronger, more unified, and intentional in caring for our people.”

These reflections underscore how participating institutions leaned into their Jesuit identity as a stabilizing force, ensuring that values such as social justice, ethical leadership, and care for the marginalized remained central to institutional responses.

While many institutions in the study reported strength in mission-driven leadership, others faced significant challenges in maintaining this balance. External

financial pressures and operational constraints sometimes forced difficult trade-offs between financial sustainability and mission commitments. Arrupe described the tension between protecting institutional integrity and financial viability, explaining,

“Our [executive leader] prioritized employee welfare and student experience. Unlike many institutions that implemented furloughs and salary cuts, we managed to avoid layoffs and maintain benefits. The decision to keep residence halls open was both mission-driven and financially necessary...we generated... unanticipated revenue, which allowed us to sustain operations without reducing staff compensation. However, there were internal disagreements—some administrators wanted to furlough staff and cut benefits earlier, but we fought against those recommendations, arguing that they were short-sighted and not aligned with our mission.”

Similarly, Borgia reflected on how financial sustainability shaped decision-making, stating,

“We knew we couldn’t do everything, but we tried to keep our mission as the guiding principle in every decision. That meant prioritizing student support, even when resources were tight. For example, we created emergency grants for students who lost jobs or housing. We also paused non-essential capital projects to redirect funds toward mental health services and retention efforts. It wasn’t easy, and we had to say no to things we cared about—but saying yes to our mission made those choices clearer.”

These experiences reveal how some institutions struggled to fully uphold every aspect of their mission, particularly when external pressures dictated operational constraints.

Despite these challenges, many leaders saw the crisis as an opportunity for transformation. Ricci described how the pandemic prompted a deeper institutional commitment to Jesuit education, explaining,

“I believe it brought us closer to our mission. During times of crisis, people gravitate toward core values. Our commitment to community, justice, and care for individuals became even more pronounced. We didn’t have to do what we did—many peer institutions remained fully remote—but we chose to bring students back to campus, offer testing and vaccination clinics, and prioritize student connection. We believed that being in community was essential to who we are. That decision wasn’t just strategic—it was spiritual. It was about who we wanted to be in a moment of crisis and how our Jesuit identity called us to act with courage, compassion, and clarity.”

Láinez echoed this sentiment, noting,

“I’m gonna answer this two ways. Did it bring us closer to the mission? In some ways, I think it gave us a greater purpose. We valued our health and well-being. We had a more holistic approach to the faculty, staff, and students in a way that connects us directly to the mission of the institution. I think—not just us, but others might feel this—the pandemic did this in general: we lost a lot of our community. Because, one, we couldn’t physically see each other. There were no more socials. Everything was done online. But at the same time, our decision-making framework remained intact—academic continuity, maintaining the student experience, and living out our Jesuit Catholic mission. We still use that same framework for evaluating any kind of institutional risk today. So, in many ways,

yes, the crisis made us more intentional, more values-based, and more committed to who we are.”

These perspectives illustrate how institutions that remained faithful to their mission emerged more resilient, using the crisis as a moment for reaffirming and deepening their Jesuit identity.

Participants in this study described how, in their experience, institutions that intentionally integrated mission-driven decision-making into their crisis response emerged stronger, more resilient, and better positioned for long-term success. While financial and operational constraints posed significant challenges, several participants reflected by anchoring decisions in Jesuit values offered a pathway to sustainability without compromising core commitments. For these leaders, the crisis tested institutional values and reaffirmed their importance, demonstrating that when mission remains a guiding force, even the most difficult decisions can be made with integrity and purpose. Ricci provided this summary, stating,

“We came out on the other side still very, very connected to our mission—maybe even more so. That might have been one of the blessings. We learned to accept change better. We realized we could pivot, do things differently, and create better balance for our employees. We reexamined workloads, improved self-care, and started staff clubs. We offered monthly professional development for all in the division and put more money into it—even when financially we probably couldn’t afford it—because people needed it. We did things we would not have done had it not been for the pandemic. Every single one of those speaks to our mission and to what we believe is important in this human existence... I don’t ever want to go

through it again, but I also don't believe it was the worst thing. We learned a lot about ourselves, we grew together, and we found that we can persevere, that we can make sacrifices for each other."

Nadal summarized this sentiment clearly, stating,

"We came out of this better. We are stronger, we are more aligned with our values, and we are more intentional about how we care for our community. So, take that!"

Theme 8: Resource Allocation

Participants described how the COVID-19 pandemic forced their Jesuit institutions to make difficult financial decisions, requiring the participants to redirect funds toward immediate needs while ensuring budgetary choices remained aligned with the institution's mission. Investments in technology, health and safety measures, and student support services took priority, often at the expense of long-term projects and institutional priorities. For example, participants noted that capital improvement plans, facility renovations, and strategic hiring initiatives were frequently delayed or canceled. One participant described pausing a multi-year campus master plan to reallocate funds toward mental health resources and emergency financial aid. These examples illustrate how leaders navigated complex financial trade-offs, seeking to balance short-term crisis response with long-term planning—all while remaining committed to Jesuit values

Shifting Budget Priorities in Response to the Crisis

To maintain operations and protect students, faculty, and staff, institutional leaders rapidly adjusted financial plans, shifting resources to address urgent pandemic-related needs. A significant portion of budgets was allocated to health and safety

infrastructure, including personal protective equipment (PPE), enhanced cleaning protocols, improved ventilation systems, and COVID-19 testing and vaccination programs. Institutions also had to strengthen remote learning capabilities, investing in IT infrastructure, hybrid and online education platforms, and emergency Wi-Fi and laptop access for students in need. Faber described the difficult financial decisions involved in these reallocation efforts, stating,

“We had to reallocate funds to prioritize safety measures, including PPE, testing infrastructure, and ventilation upgrades. That meant delaying capital improvements and putting some strategic initiatives on hold—we just didn’t have the bandwidth or resources to do everything at once.”

Nadal similarly noted how pandemic-driven expenses required institutions to pause non-urgent initiatives, explaining,

“We had long-term projects lined up, but COVID forced us to reprioritize everything. Health, student access, and operational continuity had to come first.”

These testimonies reflect the immense challenge of balancing immediate pandemic responses with sustaining long-term institutional goals.

Despite the financial strain, many institutions studied found ways to protect student services, particularly financial aid, emergency relief grants, mental health counseling, and wellness programs. Bellarmine emphasized the importance of maintaining these essential services, stating,

“I think the way we structured our financial assistance to bridge the gap—I think those decisions were very specific to and aligned with our mission. We had a pool of funds that students could apply to in order to bridge financial hardship. That’s

very much in line with who we are. Our Faculty Senate and Staff Senate even created a parallel relief fund for faculty and staff. We opened pantry resources—primarily meant for students—to the families of faculty and staff as well. These choices were a direct response to the needs we were seeing, and they spoke directly to our commitment to community and care.”

This commitment to student welfare, even amid financial uncertainty, illustrates how these Jesuit institutions prioritized mission-driven decision-making in their budget realignments.

While participants emphasized their commitment to Jesuit values in budgetary decisions, they also acknowledged the painful trade-offs required to sustain institutional operations. The financial pressures brought on by the pandemic meant that mission-aligned decision-making often involved prioritizing urgent student needs at the expense of long-term institutional goals. These tensions surfaced in decisions to delay capital projects, pause faculty hiring, and defer strategic initiatives—choices that tested the extent to which values could be upheld under pressure. The following reflections illustrate how leaders navigated these difficult trade-offs.

Difficult Trade-Offs and Institutional Sacrifices

To sustain essential services, institutions had to make difficult financial trade-offs, including:

- **Delaying Capital Projects** – Postponing campus expansions, renovations, and new construction projects.
- **Freezing Hiring and Salary Increases** – Pausing faculty and staff hiring, with some institutions implementing temporary salary reductions or

furloughs.

- Reducing Operational and Discretionary Budgets – Cutting non-essential travel, professional development, and extracurricular programming.

Participants faced the challenge of balancing immediate crisis response with long-term institutional sustainability, ensuring that financial decisions did not jeopardize the institution's future stability.

Arrupe described the difficult reality of these financial sacrifices, stating,

“We had a steering committee... [finance] would come forward with a lot of objectives and recommendations for managing the budget... and a lot of those involved adverse impacts for employees and adverse impacts for students. The understanding of mission... was relatively shallow (by the finance department) ... For the most part, we ended up in the right place... but we had to do some things to balance the budget.”

Ricci echoed this specific challenge, explaining,

“Staff did not get raises. We did not change the tuition. We suspended 403(b) contributions. Faculty got raises, and that is still actually a sore point... We did all sorts of things to save money... we knew we weren't getting room and board fees... we made some financial decisions with the idea that we were going to run a deficit budget that year... There was also a goal there to make sure that as much as possible we could make people whole financially—the people who worked their behinds off to run this place.”

These financial constraints led to difficult institutional decisions, requiring leaders to weigh financial responsibility against their duty to care for their communities.

At some institutions, budget cuts led to faculty and staff frustrations, particularly when financial constraints limited professional development opportunities, salary increases, and departmental resources. Nadal described these tensions, stating,

“We had to be honest about our limitations but also stay true to our commitments. When you’re suspending retirement contributions or holding vacancies, people want to know why. And we tried to be as open as we could.”

This underscores the importance of clear financial communication, as leaders sought to maintain trust even amid difficult financial decisions.

Balancing Financial Stewardship with Jesuit Values

For Jesuit institutions, budgeting is not just a financial exercise but an expression of mission and values. Leaders had to ensure that financial constraints did not undermine their commitment to *Cura Personalis* (care for the whole person) and *Cura Apostolica* (care for the institution). This balance required difficult conversations about preserving student access and equity with reduced funding, sustaining faculty and staff while maintaining financial stability, and balancing immediate needs with long-term institutional planning. Nadal described the ethical considerations that guided financial decision-making, stating,

“The decision was: what’s the right thing to do, given our principles. And then we had to figure out how to afford it. You know, so money was the last piece. The first piece, every single time, was health and safety—preserving life. That was always the first piece.”

Some institutions found creative financial solutions, leveraging donor contributions, endowment funds, voluntary executive pay cuts, and government aid to offset operational

costs while ensuring spending priorities remained mission-aligned. Ricci reported the impact on financial models at their institution, explaining,

“We never laid off a single person... that meant if we had to dip into our reserves, that’s what we would do. And we would bet on the institution. We would bet on our charism... But the government relief money saved a lot of institutions, and it certainly helped ours because it ended up we didn’t have to go into reserves.”

Institutions that grounded financial decision-making in Jesuit principles ensured that their commitment to holistic education and community care remained at the forefront, even in times of financial uncertainty.

Long-Term Lessons from Crisis Budgeting

While many of these financial decisions originated out of necessity, the pandemic exposed key vulnerabilities in traditional budget models and prompted institutions to rethink financial planning beyond the crisis. Leaders noted that the experience reinforced the importance of adaptability, transparent financial communication, and mission-driven financial decision-making. Bellarmine reflected on how the crisis reshaped financial leadership, stating,

“We learned that financial stewardship and mission alignment must go hand in hand. This experience forced us to be more intentional about how we allocate resources.”

Institutions that prioritized strategic financial stewardship while remaining faithful to their Jesuit identity demonstrated resilience in navigating the crisis. As Nadal summarized,

“This wasn’t just about surviving a financial crisis—it was about emerging stronger, more intentional, and more mission-driven.”

The financial challenges of the pandemic tested institutional values, but for many leaders, they also deepened their commitment to ethical budgeting and student-centered financial decision-making.

Theme 9: Crisis Communication

The findings of this study shed light on how executive leaders at Jesuit-affiliated institutions made critical decisions during the COVID-19 pandemic, balancing their commitment to mission-driven values with the operational challenges of running a university. Bellarmine emphasized the role of proactive communication in building trust, stating,

“The more we communicated, the more people trusted that we were making the best decisions we could, even if they didn’t always agree. We immediately stood up a website... set up a dashboard... weekly communications... it went out to students, faculty, staff, and parents like clockwork... providing access and consistency helped people feel more connected to decisions being made.”

This reflection illustrates how leaders recognized that clear, consistent, and transparent messaging was essential for maintaining trust and institutional credibility—especially amid rapidly evolving public health mandates, shifting institutional policies, and heightened uncertainty. Participants reported that institutions within the study prioritizing regular updates, engaged in open dialogue, and provided clear justifications for their decisions appeared more successful in managing expectations and fostering cooperation.

The Role of Transparency and Engagement

Leaders noted that early and frequent communication helped mitigate uncertainty, particularly as faculty, staff, and students sought clarity on health and safety protocols, academic policies, and campus operations. Institutions employed multiple communication strategies, including:

- Virtual Town Halls: Leadership engaged directly with faculty, students, and staff, providing updates and answering questions.
- Email and Website Updates: Regular messaging ensured that all stakeholders had access to up-to-date information.
- Faculty and Staff Briefings: Administrators held ongoing discussions with faculty leadership to address concerns and provide guidance.

Láinez highlighted the importance of open and responsive leadership, stating, *“We made sure people knew they could ask questions, even the difficult ones. We had a monthly meeting on Zoom, with the Provost, open to the faculty and staff to give an update... it allowed us to be extremely transparent and clear regarding what is going on... just providing that space showed care and compassion during a turmoil time for everyone.”*

However, leaders also acknowledged that communication alone was not always enough to ease tensions. Some stakeholders disagreed with institutional decisions, particularly regarding in-person learning policies, vaccination mandates, and financial concerns.

Borgia reflected on these challenges, explaining,

“We were really, really focused on data... But we also had to consider: how well and willing would our community be in terms of adhering to a policy? So does it

need to be strict? Does it need to be a little bit more flexible? Just keeping in mind the practicality of decisions with health and safety. Some wanted stricter enforcement, others needed room for grace... We had to constantly balance those tensions. No decision made everyone happy, but we tried to be as transparent as possible about the reasons behind each step.”

Despite ongoing debates over campus policies, institutions that engaged stakeholders in dialogue—rather than simply announcing decisions—found it easier to maintain institutional credibility and cooperation. Faber noted that engagement in decision-making processes reduced resistance, stating,

“We were really trying to create a very participatory engagement and decision-making process. This wasn’t just [redacted] whimsically making decisions—we had a planning task force, and those members were actively consulting with different subgroups across campus. Word got out about how we were going about our decision-making and what was informing it. We did surveys of our students and of our employees—multiple times—and we used that feedback to help shape not just our decisions, but also how we communicated about them. Then after the surveys were done, we didn’t just file them away—we actually highlighted the changes we made in response in future communications. I think people appreciated being part of the process, even if they didn’t agree with everything we did.”

Leaders also acknowledged that communication alone was not always enough to ease tensions. In these cases, leaders found that open dialogue—even when difficult—was crucial for maintaining institutional integrity and stakeholder trust.

Challenges in Crisis Communication

While several participants in leadership roles described efforts to maintain transparency, they also acknowledged the difficulty of navigating conflicting stakeholder expectations. Faculty, students, parents, and public health officials often brought divergent perspectives to issues such as instructional modality, health protocols, and campus access. This was not a uniform experience across all institutions, but several participants reported moments of backlash or confusion—especially when policies shifted rapidly in response to evolving public health guidance. At some institutions, faculty raised concerns about academic continuity, while parents demanded clearer safety measures. Students sometimes expressed frustration with inconsistent restrictions. These tensions required careful messaging and placed added strain on communication strategies.

Arrupe described how frequent policy changes led to uncertainty, stating, *“It was a really bumpy road, because... every day it was a different set of, you know, protocols and practices and policies... It was hard to get a handle on the fluid and evolving data. And I think... it was uneven, it was inconsistent across units. There wasn't a consistent enough approach across the board... I think we could have done a much better job eliminating at least some of the hypocrisy and improving some of the consistency.”*

Similarly, Faber reflected on the difficulty of balancing transparency with evolving guidelines, explaining,

“We had to communicate that we were making the best decisions with the information available. But when the guidance changed, it felt like we were constantly backtracking.”

To address these challenges, some leaders adopted a structured crisis communication approach, ensuring that updates were:

- **Timely and Frequent:** Preventing misinformation and speculation by providing consistent updates.
- **Mission-Aligned:** Framing decisions through Jesuit values of discernment, ethical leadership, and *Cura Personalis*.
- **Stakeholder-Informed:** Engaging faculty, student leaders, and staff in shaping key messages and policies.

Borgia explained how consistent messaging helped maintain institutional stability, stating,

“We kept a steady rhythm of communication—weekly updates, town halls, and direct faculty engagement. That helped prevent panic and built confidence in our leadership.”

Lessons in Leadership and Communication

The pandemic underscored that for the institutions represented by this study’s participants, effective crisis communication is about delivering information, fostering trust, managing uncertainty, and maintaining institutional credibility. Participants who described framing communication through Jesuit values, ensuring that messaging was transparent, ethical, and student-centered, reported that their institutions emerged from the crisis with stronger stakeholder relationships and greater institutional resilience.

Kolvenbach reflected on the long-term impact of crisis communication, stating, *“How we communicated during the pandemic shaped how people saw leadership. I think the fact that mission was discussed with some regularity helped to enrich and to humanize and to balance the response... and was a meaningful factor in the mix with some other fairly powerful forces.”*

For several participants, prioritizing clarity, consistency, and stakeholder engagement became essential strategies for sustaining trust during the crisis. These reflections suggest that transparent communication was not merely a logistical necessity, but a reflection of institutional values—reinforcing leadership in service of the common good and complementing financial and operational efforts.

Findings

The findings of this study shed light on how executive leaders at Jesuit-affiliated institutions made critical decisions during the COVID-19 pandemic, balancing their commitment to mission-driven values with the operational realities. Through interviews with eight senior leaders, nine key themes emerged, revealing how these institutions managed financial constraints, governance structures, stakeholder tensions, and crisis communication, all while staying rooted in their Jesuit identity.

However, not all institutions interpreted or applied their mission in the same way. While some prioritized student and faculty wellbeing, others framed financial sustainability as an extension of their mission. Location, institutional size, institutional resource and governance structures shaped decision-making approaches, leading to different institutional responses despite shared Jesuit principles.

Balancing Financial Sustainability and Jesuit Mission Commitments

One of the most significant findings is the ongoing challenge of balancing financial sustainability with Jesuit mission commitments. Some leaders pushed back against cost-cutting measures that might have negatively affected students and faculty, while others recognized that certain financial adjustments were unavoidable. Faber described this constant tension, stating,

“We were constantly balancing: Ensuring student safety and wellbeing, maintaining financial sustainability, and fulfilling our educational mission. At times, these priorities aligned. Other times, they created tensions that required careful decision-making.”

While some institutions avoided furloughs and salary cuts, others had no choice but to implement them due to revenue losses. Nadal explained how finances strained institutional priorities, stating,

“We knew we had to cut costs, but we also knew where we couldn’t cut—student aid, faculty support, and mission-aligned programs. That’s where the hardest conversations happened.”

Some participants who framed financial decisions through Jesuit values—such as *Cura Personalis* (care for the whole person) and *Magis* (the pursuit of excellence)—found that mission and financial sustainability were not always at odds but instead worked in complementary ways. Arrupe reflected,

“At the heart of our budgeting process was a question: Does this decision reflect who we are? If we had to make financial cuts, we made sure they did not come at the expense of students or our most vulnerable employees.”

Institutions with larger endowments or strong donor networks had more flexibility in financial decision-making, while smaller institutions relied heavily on emergency aid and government relief funding. Some, like Laínez, leveraged donor generosity to maintain core mission priorities, explaining,

“Donors stepped in at key moments, allowing us to protect financial aid and emergency student support.”

These findings suggest that financial sustainability and Jesuit values were not always in conflict, but how institutions defined and operationalized their mission shaped financial decision-making strategies.

Governance Structures and Institutional Resilience

Another central finding was the role of governance structures in institutional resilience. Leaders who engaged faculty, student affairs professionals, and external experts in decision-making often navigated the crisis more effectively. However, broad participation sometimes delayed institutional responses, forcing leaders to balance inclusion with operational efficiency. Nadal reflected on this challenge, stating,

“We wanted to make sure all voices were heard, but when time was of the essence, having too many perspectives sometimes made it difficult to act quickly.”

In contrast, institutions that relied on a more centralized governance model found it easier to implement quick decisions, but this sometimes led to faculty resistance. Bellarmine described how governance structures shaped institutional responses, explaining,

“We structured decision-making through a crisis team, but faculty wanted more input. The challenge was finding a way to move quickly without undermining shared governance.”

Participants from institutions that found a middle ground—engaging faculty and staff in decision-making while maintaining an efficient leadership structure—reported stronger trust and collaboration. Ricci noted,

“We involved faculty and staff early, so even when decisions weren’t popular, people understood the process and rationale.”

These findings highlight the importance of governance structures in shaping institutional responses, showing that both centralized and participatory models had advantages and limitations.

Stakeholder Alignment and Crisis Communication

Leaders had to navigate competing stakeholder interests, including: (1) faculty pushback on returning to in-person teaching; (2) student concerns about mental health, financial aid, and access to campus resources; and (3) external pressures from public health agencies, accrediting bodies, and local governments. According to several participants, maintaining open and transparent communication contributed to a stronger sense of trust and cooperation among stakeholders. In contrast, participants who described more top-down approaches also noted increased frustration or resistance within their campus communities.

Arrupe described the challenge of faculty resistance, stating,

“One major battle was over the return to in-person instruction. Faculty, particularly those in scientific fields, often disagreed with administrative

decisions. Many faculty members wanted remote options extended indefinitely. Leadership, however, was committed to returning to in-person education, as it was core to the institution's mission."

Institutions that engaged stakeholders early and framed decisions through mission-based values found it easier to secure faculty and student buy-in. Laínez described how transparency helped mitigate frustration, stating,

"The more we communicated, the more people trusted that we were making the best decisions we could, even if they didn't always agree."

Jesuit Mission as a Guiding Force

Finally, the study reinforced that, in these institutions, Jesuit values remained a guiding force in institutional decision-making, even in moments of pressures and uncertainty. Participants from schools that intentionally integrated mission-driven principles into governance, budgeting, and student support strategies reported that their institutions emerged from the crisis stronger and more aligned with their core values.

Faber explained,

"The pandemic forced us to ask: Are we who we say we are? If anything, the crisis made our commitment to Jesuit education even stronger."

Similarly, Bellarmine noted,

"Despite multiple leadership transitions, our core mission remained strong. The crisis reinforced our commitment to student-centered decision-making, the importance of financial and social support systems, and the need for adaptability in maintaining institutional values."

Ricci summarized,

“I think anytime there are fears about safety, we tend to gravitate to the things that bind us together. That’s when we go to our center—our core. I think the pandemic actually deepened our commitment to mission. Jesuit institutions do mission better than anybody in the world... our charism is ageless.”

Participants’ accounts suggest that mission-driven decision-making was not merely aspirational—it functioned as a stabilizing force amid disruption. By anchoring financial, operational, and student support strategies in Jesuit values, institutions reported preserving their ethical compass and emerging from the crisis not only intact, but more deeply aligned with their core identity.

Discussion

The findings of this study draw on accounts from executive leaders at Jesuit-affiliated institutions of how their institutions navigated decision-making during the COVID-19 pandemic, balancing their commitment to Jesuit values with the realities of institutional operations. These results align with existing research on values-based leadership and crisis governance while highlighting the unique challenges faced by mission-driven institutions. Prior studies suggest that leaders in higher education frequently grapple with the tension between financial sustainability and ethical obligations (Kezar, 2017; Bolman & Deal, 2021). Study findings reinforce that tension but also demonstrates that institutions that remained committed to their Jesuit identity could make financially sound decisions that ultimately strengthened their long-term stability.

A key contribution of this research is its illustration of how Jesuit institutions operationalized mission-driven leadership during the COVID-19 crisis. While existing scholarship on adaptive leadership (Heifetz et al., 2009) emphasizes flexibility, collaboration, and stakeholder engagement as essential for navigating uncertainty, this study highlights how Jesuit leaders integrated these principles with Ignatian values, such as *Cura Personalis* (care for the whole person) and *Cura Apostolica* (care for the institution). Institutions that prioritized inclusive decision-making—actively engaging faculty, students, and administrators—not only managed the pandemic’s unpredictability but also reported stronger institutional trust. However, the findings also reveal a critical challenge: while inclusivity fosters engagement and alignment with mission, it can also slow decision-making, particularly in moments of crisis that demand urgent action. This suggests that while inclusive governance is essential, Jesuit leaders must also find ways to balance broad stakeholder involvement with the need for timely, decisive action.

Another significant theme that emerged in this study was the role of faculty resistance, particularly in relation to governance structures and institutional communication. This finding aligns with previous research by Kezar and Holcombe (2017), which suggests that crises can amplify tensions within shared governance frameworks. However, this study extends the literature by illustrating that, among the Jesuit institutions represented, those that intentionally used mission-informed processes—such as discernment, transparency, and dialogue—appeared to mitigate faculty resistance more effectively than those that relied on hierarchical or top-down decision-making structures. Participants from more collaborative contexts described

greater faculty alignment and trust, while others noted that limited engagement contributed to resistance and institutional strain.

Additionally, this research underscores the critical role of communication in crisis leadership, reinforcing existing scholarship on the necessity of transparency and consistency (Boin et al., 2017). Institutions that maintained regular, mission-aligned communication described success in fostering cohesion and sustaining stakeholder trust. Conversely, institutions that experienced inconsistent messaging or limited stakeholder engagement reported dissatisfaction and confusion. These findings suggest that crisis leadership in Jesuit institutions is most effective when decision-making is not only mission-driven but also reinforced by deliberate and structured communication strategies.

Like any study, this research has its limitations. The sample size was limited to eight executive leaders, providing in-depth perspectives but limiting generalizability across all Jesuit institutions. Additionally, reliance on retrospective self-reported data introduces potential biases, such as hindsight distortion and institutional allegiance, particularly given the emotionally charged nature of the pandemic. Future research could expand upon these findings by incorporating perspectives from faculty, staff, and students or conducting comparative studies between Jesuit and non-Jesuit institutions to explore how mission-informed decision-making differs across institutional contexts.

While the findings of this study emerged specifically within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, their implications extend well beyond this singular crisis, contributing to a deeper understanding of leadership in Jesuit-affiliated higher education. The core tensions between financial pragmatism and ethical, mission-informed decision-making are not unique to crisis situations; rather, they represent ongoing challenges faced

by leaders in Jesuit higher education institutions broadly. This study illustrates that these tensions can be constructively navigated through intentional, values-based discernment, particularly when guided by Jesuit principles such as *Cura Personalis* and *Cura Apostolica*.

By aligning with adaptive leadership models (Heifetz et al., 2009) and Servant Leadership principles (Greenleaf, 1977), this research underscores that flexibility, inclusivity, transparent communication, and community engagement are crucial not only in crisis situations but also in routine institutional governance. The study's results reinforce that effectively integrating mission-driven values with pragmatic decision-making frameworks can strengthen institutional trust, enhance stakeholder collaboration, and promote long-term sustainability—even outside of crisis periods.

Additionally, this research highlights the practical benefits of explicitly embedding Jesuit mission principles within institutional decision-making processes. By doing so, Jesuit institutions can cultivate a more resilient and cohesive organizational culture that proactively mitigates resistance, fosters dialogue, and aligns diverse stakeholders around shared goals. These insights are particularly valuable in preparing institutions not only for future crises but also for navigating everyday operational challenges and strategic decision-making.

Future research should extend this exploration into broader contexts, potentially examining how mission-informed decision-making models could be effectively implemented across various institutional types beyond Jesuit higher education. Comparative studies could further investigate the extent to which values-based leadership frameworks enhance organizational resilience and sustainability across diverse

educational contexts. Ultimately, this study demonstrates that the principles guiding effective crisis response are inherently valuable for everyday institutional governance, reinforcing the compatibility and mutual reinforcement of mission integrity and operational pragmatism.

In conclusion, this study contributes valuable perspectives to leadership theory and practice, affirming that financial sustainability and mission-driven governance need not be mutually exclusive. This study suggests that Jesuit institutions may be uniquely positioned to navigate these tensions effectively by embedding Ignatian principles explicitly within their operational and governance structures. By strategically integrating adaptive and servant leadership principles with Jesuit educational values, Jesuit-affiliated institutions can effectively navigate disruptions—not only during crises but in everyday operations—ensuring that mission-driven governance remains central to their institutional identity while preserving their institutional integrity, ethical commitments, and long-term sustainability.

Summary

This chapter examined how executive leaders at Jesuit-affiliated institutions navigated decision-making during the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting the ways in which mission-driven values intersected with operational and financial realities. Through interviews with eight senior leaders, the study identified nine key themes shaping institutional responses, including the balance between financial sustainability and Jesuit identity, faculty resistance, stakeholder alignment, crisis communication, and governance structures. These findings underscore that institutions that remained intentionally

grounded in their Jesuit mission were well-positioned to make strategic, ethically informed decisions that fostered both resilience and long-term stability.

A critical insight from this research is that while inclusive decision-making enhanced institutional adaptability and stakeholder trust, it also introduced complexities that at times slowed responses in urgent situations. This underscores the need for leadership approaches that harmonize collaboration with the ability to act decisively in moments of crisis. Additionally, findings reinforce the importance of transparent communication and mission-driven financial planning in strengthening governance structures and ensuring institutional alignment.

These insights provide a foundation for the next chapter, which will translate these findings into practical recommendations. Chapter 5 introduces a mission-integrated crisis leadership framework, offering strategies to help Jesuit institutions refine governance models, enhance financial decision-making, and strengthen crisis response mechanisms while remaining faithful to their Ignatian values. By applying these recommendations, institutions can build more adaptive, mission-centered leadership approaches that prepare them for future challenges beyond the pandemic.

CHAPTER FIVE: PROPOSED SOLUTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the findings of this study on how executive leaders at Jesuit-affiliated higher education institutions navigated decision-making during the COVID-19 pandemic. By examining the decision premises that guided institutional choices during the crisis, the study provides insight into how leaders interpreted and applied both mission-informed values and operational considerations when responding to rapidly evolving challenges.

While this research was initially framed within the context of crisis leadership, it became evident that the principles guiding mission-driven decision-making extend beyond moments of uncertainty. Participants described how institutions that successfully balanced ethical leadership, operational realities, and Jesuit mission values were not only able to navigate the challenges of the pandemic effectively but also emerged stronger in areas such as governance, financial planning, and student engagement.

Bellarmino reflected on the lasting impact of these shifts, stating,

“The crisis reinforced our commitment to student-centered decision-making, the importance of financial and social support systems, and the need for adaptability in maintaining institutional values.”

Similarly, Faber noted how the experience deepened institutional alignment, explaining,

“The pandemic forced us to ask: Are we who we say we are? If anything, the crisis made our commitment to Jesuit education even stronger.”

These insights form the foundation of the Mission-Integrated Leadership Framework (MILF), a comprehensive model that embeds mission-driven decision-making into both crisis management and daily institutional operations.

The findings of this study offer a framework for understanding how institutional mission can guide decision-making in Jesuit higher education, during both stable periods and times of uncertainty. Jesuit leaders' reflections on their experiences provide valuable lessons not only for future crises but also for ongoing institutional decision-making. These findings can help current and future Jesuit leaders align decision-making practices with institutional missions rooted in Ignatian principles, ensuring that mission and business priorities remain mutually reinforcing rather than competing forces.

This chapter begins by revisiting the aim of the study and introducing the Mission-Integrated Leadership Framework as a sustainable model for Jesuit higher education leadership. It then explores practical recommendations for leadership development, strategies for implementing the proposed solutions, and methods for evaluating their effectiveness. By embedding mission-driven principles into both strategic planning and crisis leadership, this chapter aims to equip institutions with a sustainable approach to resilient, ethical, and student-centered decision-making.

Aim of the Study

This study explored how the Jesuit mission and operational priorities influenced decision-making at American Jesuit higher education institutions during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, it examined the decision premises Jesuit leaders relied upon, the frameworks that guided their choices, and how they balanced ethical commitments with practical institutional needs. While the study was initially focused on leadership during a

crisis, the findings revealed that mission-driven decision-making is not only essential in times of uncertainty but also plays a critical role in shaping long-term institutional resilience, financial sustainability, and stakeholder trust.

By analyzing the experiences of executive leaders during the crisis, this study provides insights into how Jesuit institutions—and other mission-based organizations—can navigate complex challenges without compromising their core values. The lessons learned from this research extend beyond the immediate context of the pandemic and offer a foundation for developing leadership models that integrate institutional mission into both everyday decision-making and crisis response.

The proposed Mission-Integrated Leadership Framework builds upon these findings, offering a structured approach to embedding Jesuit principles into governance, budgeting, stakeholder engagement, and student support. By ensuring that mission and business priorities work in tandem, rather than in conflict, this framework equips current and future leaders with the tools to foster ethical, student-centered, and financially responsible leadership in both stable periods and times of crisis.

Proposed Solutions

The findings of this study highlight the ongoing challenge that Jesuit institutions face in balancing their mission-driven values with financial and operational realities. The COVID-19 pandemic underscored this tension, forcing institutions to make difficult decisions that tested their commitment to student wellbeing, faculty support, and financial sustainability. However, what became clear through this research is that mission and business do not have to be competing forces. Institutions that remained firmly rooted

in their Jesuit identity often emerged stronger, more resilient, and more aligned with their core values on the other side of the crisis.

This study proposes the **Mission-Integrated Leadership Framework (MILF)** as a structured approach to help Jesuit institutions navigate this balance more effectively. While originally conceptualized as a crisis leadership model, the findings suggest that this framework has broader applications beyond emergency response. By embedding ethical leadership, student wellbeing, and holistic education into the very fabric of decision-making structures, this framework provides institutions with a practical, sustainable way to uphold their Jesuit identity while making sound financial and strategic choices.

The proposed framework consists of five key strategies that ensure institutional decision-making remains mission-centered, ethically grounded, and financially responsible—whether in moments of stability or during times of uncertainty.

Core Principles of the Mission-Integrated Leadership Framework (MILF)

1. **Mission-Integrated Crisis Governance Model** builds upon existing shared governance practices common to many Jesuit institutions by establishing inclusive leadership structures that intentionally integrate faculty, students, student affairs professionals, and financial administrators into crisis-era decision-making processes. While many Jesuit campuses already operate with collaborative governance structures, participants in this study emphasized the importance of elevating these voices in a more intentional and coordinated way during moments of institutional disruption. By ensuring that multiple perspectives are not only represented but actively engaged, institutions can make well-rounded,

mission-aligned choices that balance practical financial needs with the core values of Jesuit education. Rather than reverting to top-down decision-making in times of crisis, this approach reinforces transparency, collaboration, and accountability as enduring commitments—even under pressure.

2. **Values-Based Budgeting Approach** shifts financial planning away from short-term cost-cutting and toward a sustainable, mission-aligned investment strategy. The Values-Based Budgeting Approach offers a tool to assist with financial decisions which prioritizes student success, faculty/staff wellbeing, and institutional sustainability, reinforcing—rather than undermining—the values that define Jesuit education. By integrating mission into financial decision-making, this model helps institutions strengthen stakeholder trust and create long-term financial stability. Rather than making reactive budget cuts that may compromise institutional integrity, Jesuit institutions can adopt a proactive, values-driven approach that ensures fiscal responsibility while preserving and advancing their core commitments. This strategy positions financial planning as a tool to strengthen the Jesuit mission, rather than a constraint that forces institutions to sacrifice their values in times of financial uncertainty.
3. **Stakeholder Engagement Strategy** defines a structured, transparent approach to communication and decision-making is essential for ensuring that faculty, students, and external stakeholders feel heard and informed. One of the key findings of this study was that stakeholder misalignment—particularly faculty resistance and student dissatisfaction—posed significant challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. Institutions that engaged stakeholders early in the decision-

making process fostered greater trust, reduced resistance, and created more transparent and collaborative leadership structures. This strategy formalizes an inclusive engagement model, in which leadership decisions are shaped collaboratively with those most closely connected to the institution's day-to-day realities. By bringing faculty, students, and external partners into the process early, Jesuit institutions can build trust, encourage collaboration, and strengthen institutional unity, making leadership more effective, ethical, and mission-aligned.

4. **Enhanced Student Support Systems** calls on Jesuit institutions to practice *cura personalis* (care for the whole person), and this commitment must be reflected in student support structures. The pandemic exposed gaps in mental health services, financial aid, and academic flexibility, particularly for marginalized and low-income students. Moving forward, institutions must ensure that holistic student care is not just a crisis response but a permanent priority. This strategy expands mental health resources, financial aid programs, and academic accommodations, ensuring that students have the resources they need to thrive—academically, emotionally, and financially.
5. **Jesuit Identity Alignment Protocols** remain true with their mission. Jesuit institutions must embed their core values into every aspect of institutional policy and planning. The Jesuit Identity Alignment Protocols provide a structured way to ensure that *cura personalis, magis*, and a commitment to social justice are not just aspirational principles, but active guiding forces in policy development, financial planning, and crisis response. By explicitly incorporating Jesuit values into leadership development, strategic planning, and governance structures, Jesuit

institutions can create a leadership culture that naturally integrates mission-driven priorities into all decision-making processes.

Institutionalizing Mission-Driven Decision-Making

By implementing these strategies, institutions can embed mission-driven decision-making into their leadership structures, ensuring that decision-making remains ethical, student-centered, and financially sound—whether in times of stability or crisis. Rather than treating mission and financial sustainability as opposing forces, this framework positions them as complementary pillars that, when balanced effectively, lead to stronger, more resilient institutions.

Jesuit institutions have a unique opportunity to lead by example, demonstrating that values-driven leadership is not a constraint, but an asset that enhances financial health, stakeholder trust, and student success. This framework provides a practical roadmap for institutional leaders, ensuring that Jesuit identity remains at the heart of decision-making while also positioning these institutions for long-term resilience and success.

Structural Components Mission-Integrated Leadership Framework (MILF)

Building on this foundation, the Mission-Integrated Leadership Framework provides a structured approach that embeds mission-driven leadership into the core of institutional decision-making. Rather than serving as a temporary response to crises, this framework establishes a long-term philosophy that ensures Jesuit institutions remain ethically grounded, financially resilient, and student-centered in both stable and uncertain times.

Table 3

Structural Components of Mission-Integrated Framework

Component	Application to Daily Operations	Application to Crisis Situations
1. Mission-Integrated Governance Model	Establish an inclusive governance structure that integrates faculty, students, administrators, and financial officers in institutional planning.	Activate Crisis Governance Task Force to make urgent decisions that balance mission and operational realities.
2. Values-Based Budgeting Approach	Make Jesuit-aligned financial planning a routine institutional practice, ensuring that long-term sustainability does not conflict with mission-driven values.	Prioritize mission-centered financial decision-making, in crisis, rather than short-term cost-cutting
3. Stakeholder Engagement Strategy	Implement a permanent stakeholder engagement model, including student and faculty and staff advisory councils.	Strengthen transparency and create rapid-response communication channels during crises.
4. Enhanced Student Support Systems	Invest in mental health, financial aid, and academic support as an ongoing priority, not just during crises.	Expand emergency aid and academic flexibility policies for students in times of need.
5. Jesuit Identity Alignment Protocols	Embed Jesuit values into institutional policies, faculty development, and strategic planning	Ensure crisis response strategies align with <i>cura personalis</i> and <i>magis</i> principles.

Evidence that Supports the Solution

The proposed **Mission-Integrated Leadership Framework (MILF)** is firmly grounded in the findings of this study, demonstrating that institutions that remained committed to their Jesuit mission during the pandemic tended to emerge stronger, more resilient, and better positioned for long-term success. Institutions that actively integrated *cura personalis* (care for the whole person), stakeholder engagement, and mission-aligned financial planning into their decision-making processes not only mitigated the immediate crisis effectively but also strengthened institutional trust and sustainability. Conversely, several participants in this study described how, at their institutions, a stronger emphasis on short-term financial survival over mission-driven values contributed to increased faculty resistance, student disengagement, and governance tensions, which in turn complicated long-term recovery efforts. While this study did not systematically assess pre-pandemic financial positioning, several participants suggested that institutions with greater fiscal flexibility were better able to implement mission-aligned strategies without compromising core commitments. In contrast, those already experiencing financial strain faced more difficult trade-offs between short-term survival and long-term mission integration.

These findings align with broader research on values-based leadership in higher education, which emphasizes that institutions that integrate ethical commitments into financial and strategic decision-making build greater institutional resilience and stakeholder trust (Gigliotti, 2020; Astin & Astin, 2000). The intersection of ethical leadership, financial sustainability, and crisis governance was a defining factor in how Jesuit institutions navigated the pandemic, reinforcing that decision-making frameworks

that center mission-aligned leadership principles lead to more adaptive, cohesive, and sustainable outcomes.

Evidence from Leadership Interviews: The Role of Mission-Integrated Decision-Making

The qualitative data from this study support the relevance of the Mission-Integrated Leadership Framework (MILF), with multiple participants describing how mission alignment informed their budgeting, governance, and stakeholder engagement practices during the pandemic. Rather than suggesting universal outcomes, this study reflects the perspectives of eight senior leaders at Jesuit-affiliated institutions who identified a strong relationship between mission-conscious decision-making and perceived stakeholder trust, cohesion, and clarity of purpose during the crisis.

Bellarmino shared how embedding mission into financial choices helped their institution remain values-driven under pressure:

“There were so many moments where we could have slipped into panic budgeting. But the way we stayed grounded was to ask: ‘What does our mission call us to do right now?’ That question shaped almost every conversation we had.”

Similarly, Laínez noted that governance and communication were most effective when stakeholder groups were actively engaged:

“In the past, we might have made those decisions in the President’s Cabinet and just rolled them out. But this time, we brought faculty leaders, student reps, and even some parents into the loop. It changed the conversation. It slowed things down at times—but the trust that built was worth it.”

These reflections point not to universally higher outcomes, but to *perceived improvements* in trust and institutional cohesion at those Jesuit institutions that engaged in collaborative, mission-rooted governance processes. Not every participant shared this experience, but those who did attributed it to intentionally structured, values-based decision-making.

Financial Sustainability and Mission Alignment: A Complementary Approach

A consistent challenge described by participants was the need to maintain financial sustainability without compromising core Jesuit values. Leaders faced difficult choices about where to reduce expenses, how to preserve student and faculty support, and how to ensure that budget decisions reflected institutional mission rather than purely operational concerns.

Several participants emphasized the importance of viewing budgeting through a values-based lens. As one senior leader explained:

“We knew we had to cut costs, but we also knew where we couldn’t cut—student aid, faculty support, and mission-aligned programs. That’s where the hardest conversations happened.”

Others pointed to external support as a buffer that allowed them to maintain alignment between financial choices and mission commitments. Laínez shared:

“Donors stepped in at key moments, allowing us to protect financial aid and emergency student support.”

These reflections suggest that, for the institutions represented in this study, mission-integrated financial planning played a role in sustaining community trust and institutional integrity during the pandemic. Rather than treating budget decisions as isolated financial

exercises, several leaders described them as opportunities to reaffirm Jesuit values. This aligns with values-based budgeting approaches in higher education, which emphasize that long-term financial stability is more likely when cuts are made strategically and ethically (Eckel & Trower, 2020).

Stakeholder Engagement as a Driver of Institutional Stability

One of the most prominent themes from this research was the importance of stakeholder engagement—particularly involving faculty and students—in shaping institutional responses during the pandemic. Several participants described a connection between stakeholder engagement and institutional stability, noting that faculty resistance and student dissatisfaction were more pronounced when leadership failed to involve stakeholders in key decisions.

A leader described how early faculty involvement prevented governance conflicts:

“We established a faculty working group early on. The goal was to avoid the perception that decisions were being imposed. While we didn’t always agree, giving faculty a voice helped ease tensions.”

Another participant emphasized the importance of ongoing communication with students:

“Students saw that we cared. We didn’t just send emails; we showed up with resources, with solutions. That mattered.”

These reflections suggest that structured stakeholder engagement strategies—like those proposed in the Mission-Integrated Leadership Framework—may support institutional trust and reduce governance friction in some contexts. However, participants also acknowledged that the success of these strategies depended on leadership credibility, organizational culture, and the broader institutional environment.

Crisis Communication as an Essential Leadership Tool

Another key area where evidence supports the Mission-Integrated Leadership Framework is crisis communication. Institutions that worked to engage in transparent, consistent, and mission-driven communication strategies reported increased stakeholder cooperation and trust, while those who lacked clear messaging experienced greater resistance and institutional confusion.

A leader described the effect of regular faculty and staff communication sessions:

“We held monthly meetings on Zoom with the provost and senior leadership. It was an open forum where faculty and staff could ask questions, even the tough ones. The key was providing transparency, even when people didn’t like the answers.”

Similarly, another participant reflected on the role of structured communication protocols in maintaining stability:

“We kept a steady rhythm of communication—weekly updates, town halls, and direct faculty engagement. That helped prevent panic and built confidence in our leadership.”

These findings validate the need for structured crisis communication models, which the Mission-Integrated Leadership Framework incorporates to ensure that leaders maintain trust and institutional alignment during times of uncertainty.

Student-Centered Leadership: Strengthening Cura Personalis in Institutional Support

Finally, this research reinforces the concept that institutions that prioritized student well-being—through enhanced mental health support, financial aid, and flexible academic policies—reported higher student retention and engagement during and after

the pandemic. One executive leader explained how their institution expanded mental health services in response to student needs:

“We saw an increase in counseling needs, so we expanded virtual services to meet students where they were.”

Another participant described the importance of financial support for at-risk students:

“We created an emergency relief fund specifically for students whose families had lost jobs. No one should have to drop out because of financial hardship.”

These findings support the Mission-Integrated Leadership Framework’s Enhanced Student Support Systems, ensuring that *cura personalis* is not just a crisis response but a permanent institutional priority.

The evidence from this study clearly supports the need for a Mission-Integrated Leadership Framework (MILF) that embeds Jesuit values into governance, budgeting, stakeholder engagement, crisis communication, and student support. The findings demonstrate that institutions that integrated *cura personalis*, *magis*, and ethical leadership principles into their decision-making reported higher levels of institutional trust, stronger financial sustainability, and more effective crisis management.

By prioritizing mission-aligned decision-making over short-term financial gains, these institutions were better equipped to balance operational realities with ethical commitments, reinforcing that mission and financial sustainability are not opposing forces but complementary priorities.

The MILF framework offers practical, structured strategies to institutionalize these best practices, ensuring that Jesuit higher education leadership remains ethically

grounded, financially responsible, and student-centered—both in times of crisis and in everyday operations.

Evidence that Challenges the Solution

While the Mission-Integrated Leadership Framework (MILF) provides a promising model for aligning mission-driven values with financial sustainability and governance structures, its implementation is not without challenges. Research suggests that institutional change in higher education is often met with resistance, particularly when financial constraints and long-standing governance structures complicate decision-making (Kezar, 2017; Bolman & Deal, 2021). The findings of this study suggest that several Jesuit institutions represented in the interviews sought to lead with mission-driven values during the pandemic, which participants associated with increased stakeholder trust and institutional cohesion. However, leaders also described encountering structural and financial challenges that at times limited their ability to fully realize values-based decision-making

This section outlines five primary challenges associated with implementing the MILF framework: (1) resistance to change from faculty and administrators, (2) financial constraints and budget realities, (3) competing stakeholder priorities and decision-making speed, (4) implementation complexity and bureaucratic resistance, and (5) the risk of mission dilution in financial crises. These obstacles must be critically examined to develop strategies that enable successful adoption while ensuring both institutional viability and mission alignment.

Resistance to Change from Faculty and Administrators

One of the most persistent challenges in implementing mission-integrated leadership models is resistance from faculty, administrators, and governing boards. Change resistance in higher education institutions is well-documented, particularly when new governance structures alter traditional decision-making processes (Kezar & Holcombe, 2017). Several participants described how faculty skepticism during the pandemic—particularly in response to top-down decisions—created tension and mistrust. These experiences suggest that moving toward more collaborative, mission-aligned governance models may require intentional trust-building efforts and cultural shifts to overcome residual hesitation or skepticism.

The study findings reflect this tension, as one participant described faculty concerns over the perceived loss of autonomy in institutional decision-making:

“Faculty wanted more autonomy over classroom decisions, students wanted more flexibility in tuition policies, and public health officials wanted stricter enforcement of regulations. There was no perfect solution.”

Administrative resistance is also a potential barrier. For financial officers accustomed to conventional cost-cutting models, a shift toward values-based budgeting may seem impractical in times of financial strain. Without clear evidence of success, administrators may prioritize short-term fiscal concerns over long-term mission alignment. To mitigate resistance, institutions must:

- Communicate the long-term benefits of mission-integrated leadership models.
- Implement pilot programs to demonstrate measurable success.

- Secure leadership buy-in to ensure alignment across institutional priorities.

Financial Constraints and Budget Realities

A significant challenge to adopting the Mission-Integrated Leadership Framework is the financial burden that comes with aligning budgeting priorities with mission-driven initiatives. Many Jesuit institutions rely heavily on tuition revenue and endowment funds, making it difficult to allocate additional resources for student support services, faculty well-being, and crisis governance improvements (Eckel & Trower, 2020).

Financial strain was a recurring theme in leadership interviews. One participant emphasized that, for smaller institutions, the survival of the university itself was at stake, making it difficult to prioritize mission-driven financial planning:

“We weren’t just managing a financial setback—we were trying to figure out if we could stay open long-term. Unlike larger schools, we didn’t have millions in reserves.”

For institutions experiencing budget shortfalls, fully integrating a values-based budgeting model may conflict with immediate financial realities. The study findings suggest that, while mission-driven decision-making fosters long-term resilience, short-term financial constraints often force leaders to prioritize fiscal survival over mission commitment.

To address financial limitations, institutions should:

- Gradually phase in budget reforms, rather than implementing immediate large-scale changes.
- Seek external funding opportunities, such as donor support or government aid.

- Prioritize high-impact, low-cost interventions that align with institutional mission and financial realities.

Competing Stakeholder Priorities and Decision-Making Speed

Another challenge in implementing a mission-integrated framework is the complexity of balancing stakeholder priorities. Faculty, students, administrators, public health officials, and external accrediting bodies often hold conflicting perspectives on institutional policies, particularly in times of crisis (Gigliotti, 2020). Inclusive governance models, while beneficial for engagement and transparency, risk slowing institutional responses to rapidly evolving challenges.

A study participant reflected on the difficulty of balancing collaborative decision-making with the need for timely responses:

“We wanted to make sure all voices were heard, but when time was of the essence, having too many perspectives sometimes made it difficult to act quickly.”

This finding is consistent with previous research on shared governance, which highlights that while participatory decision-making fosters institutional trust, it may also hinder crisis response efforts (Boin et al., 2017). To navigate these tensions, institutions should implement a tiered governance model that allows a crisis leadership team to make rapid decisions while broader advisory groups provide long-term input, establish clear stakeholder engagement protocols to ensure inclusivity without compromising decision-making efficiency, and train leaders in adaptive governance to equip them with the skills needed to manage stakeholder tensions effectively.

Implementation Complexity and Bureaucratic Resistance

Jesuit institutions operate within long-standing governance and financial structures that are not easily reformed. The complexity of bureaucratic processes, procedural constraints, and competing institutional initiatives may slow the adoption of mission-integrated leadership models. While transparency and stakeholder engagement are essential for fostering institutional trust, they can also create decision-making bottlenecks that hinder timely implementation of reforms.

One participant described this challenge, noting how multiple layers of approval often delayed necessary decisions:

“Every decision had to pass through multiple layers of approval, which sometimes meant we were behind the curve. But we believed that transparency and inclusion would pay off in the long run.”

To navigate these complexities, institutions must take a strategic approach to reform by introducing changes in phases to allow for gradual adaptation, identifying administrative champions who can advocate for and lead implementation efforts, and aligning new governance models with existing institutional policies to minimize disruption. By embedding values-driven decision-making within the existing structure rather than attempting immediate large-scale transformation, institutions can increase the likelihood of long-term success while maintaining operational stability.

Risk of Mission Dilution in Financial Crisis

A significant challenge facing Jesuit institutions is the risk of mission dilution when financial crises necessitate difficult trade-offs. While mission-driven leadership emphasizes *cura personalis* (care for the whole person) and *cura apostolica* (care for the

institution), economic pressures can force institutions to make decisions that prioritize immediate financial stability over long-term mission integrity. Some leaders in this study acknowledged that compromises were necessary to remain financially viable.

One participant described this challenge, explaining how institutions had to navigate budget constraints while still prioritizing community well-being:

“There were moments where we had to make tough financial choices—reducing budgets, freezing hiring—while still ensuring that students and employees felt supported.”

To mitigate this risk, institutions must take a strategic and mission-centered approach to financial decision-making. This includes establishing financial safeguards that protect mission-driven programs from being disproportionately affected by budget cuts, developing spending priorities that align with Jesuit values to ensure that student services and faculty support remain intact, and balancing fiscal responsibility with ethical commitments to uphold institutional identity even during economic downturns. By embedding mission-aligned financial planning into budgetary frameworks and crisis response strategies, Jesuit institutions can lay the groundwork for financial decisions that reflect and reinforce their foundational values—even in times of constraint.

Conclusion of Evidence Challenges

While the Mission-Integrated Leadership Framework presents a compelling strategy for Jesuit institutions, its successful implementation requires careful planning, stakeholder engagement, and financial strategy. The challenges outlined in this section highlight the need for a phased implementation approach, ensuring that mission-driven

decision-making strengthens institutional resilience without compromising operational efficiency.

By proactively addressing financial limitations, stakeholder tensions, and governance complexities, Jesuit institutions can navigate these challenges effectively, ensuring that their leadership models remain ethically grounded, financially sustainable, and student-centered. Future research should further explore best practices for overcoming institutional resistance and integrating values-based governance models in diverse higher education contexts.

Implementation of the Proposed Solution

The successful adoption of the Mission-Integrated Leadership Framework (MILF) requires a structured, phased approach that allows institutions to gradually adjust, build stakeholder trust, and refine strategies based on real-world application. By implementing changes incrementally, Jesuit institutions can ensure that mission-driven decision-making is embedded into their governance, budgeting, and crisis leadership structures in a sustainable and strategic manner.

Phase 1: Institutional Integration

The first phase of implementation focuses on establishing the foundational structures necessary to integrate mission-aligned governance, budgeting, and student support systems into institutional decision-making. This phase lays the groundwork for sustainable mission-driven leadership, ensuring that financial and operational priorities remain aligned with Jesuit values and institutional goals.

To initiate this process, institutions must form a Mission-Integrated Governance Task Force, comprising faculty, administrators, student affairs leaders, financial officers,

and student representatives. This diverse coalition ensures that decision-making reflects both mission and financial considerations, fostering a balanced approach to leadership that upholds institutional identity while maintaining fiscal responsibility. By incorporating voices from across campus leadership and student communities, this task force helps cultivate collaborative governance structures that will serve as the foundation for mission-aligned decision-making.

In addition to establishing governance structures, institutions should conduct a comprehensive financial and mission alignment audit to assess how current budget priorities reflect Jesuit values. This audit will identify areas for adjustment, ensuring that financial planning supports student well-being, faculty development, and mission-aligned institutional priorities. By evaluating how resources are allocated and determining whether spending practices align with *cura personalis* and *cura apostolica*, institutions can develop financial models that reinforce mission-driven leadership rather than compromise it.

Finally, developing a stakeholder engagement strategy is essential to fostering transparency, collaboration, and institutional trust. Establishing clear communication channels between faculty, administration, and students will help create early buy-in and reduce resistance to change. A well-structured engagement plan ensures that faculty feel included in governance reforms, administrators are equipped with data-driven insights, and students see their perspectives reflected in institutional policies.

By establishing this necessary infrastructure, institutions can streamline decision-making processes, align financial sustainability with mission-driven leadership, and create a solid foundation for subsequent phases of implementation. This initial phase

ensures that the institution is structurally and strategically prepared to integrate mission-centered governance and financial planning into long-term institutional practices.

Phase 2: Pilot and Refinement

With the foundational structures established, the next phase focuses on piloting and refining the Mission-Integrated Leadership Framework (MILF) in select departments or divisions before expanding institution-wide. This phase allows institutions to test the feasibility of mission-driven financial planning and governance models, identify potential challenges, and make necessary adjustments before full-scale implementation. By conducting pilot programs, institutions can ensure that mission-aligned decision-making is both practical and sustainable, allowing leadership to refine strategies that enhance institutional resilience, faculty engagement, and operational effectiveness.

The first key initiative in this phase is the *Values-Based Budgeting Pilot*, where institutions implement mission-aligned financial planning at a departmental or divisional level. This approach enables leadership to evaluate the effectiveness of values-based budgeting in practice, ensuring that financial decisions continue to support student success, faculty well-being, and institutional priorities. By testing this model on a smaller scale, institutions can assess feasibility, identify operational challenges, and make necessary modifications before expanding the approach to the entire university.

Simultaneously, institutions should initiate *Governance Model Testing* by launching inclusive decision-making structures that formally integrate faculty, administrators, and student representatives. This step ensures that governance reforms are collaborative, transparent, and reflective of Jesuit values. Establishing a governance

model that balances mission considerations with operational realities will help institutions build trust across campus communities and reduce resistance to institutional changes.

Another critical component of this phase is *Crisis Leadership Refinement*, which involves developing and testing crisis response strategies that embed Jesuit mission principles, such as *cura personalis* (care for the whole person) and *cura apostolica* (care for the institution). The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated the need for institutions to have adaptive, ethical, and mission-driven crisis leadership in place. By piloting crisis response strategies, institutions can ensure that future challenges are met with proactive leadership that aligns with their core mission while maintaining institutional stability.

Last, *Stakeholder Feedback and Adjustment* is essential in refining governance models, financial planning, and mission-aligned decision-making processes. Gathering insights from faculty, staff, and students will allow institutions to identify areas for improvement, adjust policies accordingly, and enhance engagement in governance structures. Ongoing feedback ensures that institutional decision-making remains collaborative, inclusive, and aligned with Jesuit educational values.

By testing and refining these core elements, institutions can ensure that mission-integrated leadership is not only a theoretical ideal but also a functional, scalable model that enhances both institutional sustainability and mission fidelity. The iterative nature of this phase allows institutions to adapt based on real-world application, fostering a governance structure that is both effective and mission-driven before full-scale implementation.

Phase 3: Full Implementation

The final phase of implementation focuses on scaling and institutionalizing the Mission-Integrated Leadership Framework (MILF) across institutional decision-making processes, ensuring that mission-aligned leadership becomes an enduring institutional practice. By this stage, institutions will have refined governance models and financial planning strategies through pilot programs and are now prepared to expand and sustain these mission-driven practices institution-wide. This phase marks the transition from experimentation to full integration, embedding Jesuit values into leadership, financial sustainability, and long-term institutional governance.

A key priority in this phase is the expansion of values-based budgeting across the entire institution. By integrating mission-aligned financial decision-making into all departments, administrative units, and strategic planning processes, institutions can ensure that financial sustainability does not come at the expense of mission integrity. Rather than using short-term cost-cutting measures, leadership must prioritize long-term investment strategies that reinforce *cura personalis* (care for the whole person) and *cura apostolica* (care for the institution as a whole). This approach ensures that financial decisions continue to support student success, faculty development, and institutional resilience.

In addition to expanding financial frameworks, institutions must institutionalize governance structures that embed Jesuit principles into strategic planning, budgeting, and crisis leadership. This requires ensuring that inclusive, mission-aligned decision-making is embedded into university bylaws, leadership structures, and long-term planning initiatives. By formalizing these structures, institutions can ensure that future leadership

transitions do not compromise mission-driven priorities but rather strengthen institutional identity and ethical leadership.

To maintain long-term success, institutions should establish continuous assessment and feedback mechanisms that allow for ongoing evaluation, policy refinement, and stakeholder engagement. This involves regularly measuring the impact of mission-integrated decision-making on financial sustainability, faculty and student well-being, and overall institutional resilience. Stakeholder feedback mechanisms, including faculty governance committees, student advisory boards, and administrative working groups will provide ongoing input to ensure that policies remain responsive to the evolving needs of the institution.

By the end of this phase, Jesuit values will be intentionally embedded into institutional leadership, financial planning, and governance structures, supporting decision-making that remains aligned with mission principles and operational realities. Jesuit institutions that successfully complete this phase will have laid the foundation for a resilient, ethically grounded, and financially sustainable governance model—positioning themselves as leaders in mission-driven higher education. Through strategic scaling and ongoing assessment, Jesuit institutions can safeguard their mission while navigating financial and operational challenges with integrity and purpose.

While this model offers an aspirational vision, fully embedding Jesuit values into every layer of institutional practice presents significant challenges. Competing departmental priorities, individual leadership philosophies, and external pressures can complicate consistent application. As such, implementation will require not only strong sponsorship and cabinet-level alignment but also intentional structures for

long-term accountability, leadership development, and cultural reinforcement. The next section outlines these critical success factors and identifies strategies to sustain mission-integration over time.

Factors and Stakeholders Related to the Implementation of the Solution

The successful implementation of the Mission-Integrated Leadership Framework (MILF) necessitates strategic leadership engagement and cross-campus collaboration to ensure that mission-driven decision-making becomes a sustainable and institutionalized practice. Given the complexity of higher education governance, multiple stakeholders must work together to integrate values-based leadership principles into financial planning, governance structures, and crisis management strategies. This collaborative approach ensures that institutional decision-making reflects both Jesuit identity and operational realities, balancing ethical commitments with financial sustainability.

University Senior Leadership

The role of senior leadership is central to the success of mission-integrated governance. While presidents, provosts, and chief financial officers (CFOs) play a key role in aligning financial priorities with the Jesuit mission and maintaining institutional resilience, they cannot do this work alone. Effective implementation of mission-integrated leadership requires the full engagement of the senior leadership cabinet—including leaders in student affairs, enrollment, mission and ministry, diversity and inclusion, and academic affairs. A shared commitment across functional areas is essential to embedding values-based budgeting and governance as standard practice.

Institutional leaders must also navigate external financial pressures, accreditation requirements, and long-term fiscal planning while ensuring that mission-driven decision-

making remains a guiding principle rather than an aspirational ideal. This requires balancing short-term financial constraints with long-term institutional integrity and demonstrating a commitment to ethical leadership that prioritizes both fiscal responsibility and the Jesuit tradition of holistic education.

Faculty and Academic Deans

Faculty and academic deans play a pivotal role in implementing mission-driven governance, particularly in the areas of curriculum development, faculty governance, and academic integrity. Engaging faculty early in the process is essential to building trust and fostering cooperation within institutional governance structures. Given the shared governance model in higher education, faculty resistance can pose a significant challenge to the adoption of new leadership frameworks. Without faculty buy-in, the implementation of values-based budgeting and mission-integrated decision-making could face unnecessary obstacles, limiting its effectiveness.

Faculty involvement also ensures that academic priorities remain aligned with Jesuit educational values, reinforcing *cura personalis* in teaching, mentoring, and research. By participating in decision-making processes, faculty can advocate for pedagogical models and policies that support students holistically, ensuring that academic excellence is both mission-driven and financially sustainable.

Student Affairs Leaders

Student affairs professionals are integral to the success of holistic, mission-centered governance. Their expertise in student engagement, mental health, diversity and inclusion, and student success initiatives ensures that institutional policies reflect the needs of students as whole individuals—academically, socially, and emotionally. In

alignment with Jesuit principles of *cura personalis* and social justice, student affairs leaders advocate for equity-based decision-making, ensuring that financial constraints do not disproportionately affect marginalized and underserved student populations.

Moreover, during times of institutional crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, student affairs leaders play a critical role in guiding university response efforts, mental health initiatives, and emergency support systems. Their involvement in governance ensures that student well-being remains a central consideration in institutional decision-making, reinforcing the Jesuit commitment to ethical leadership and service.

Students and Student Representatives

Although students may not be directly involved in high-level financial and administrative decision-making, their voices must be incorporated into governance processes to ensure that policies remain responsive to their needs. Engaging student representatives in advisory committees, governance councils, and budgetary discussions can foster a greater sense of institutional trust and transparency. Institutions that include students in governance demonstrate a commitment to shared leadership and ethical decision-making, reinforcing the Jesuit emphasis on social responsibility and community engagement.

By ensuring that student perspectives are reflected in decision-making, institutions can develop policies that enhance student well-being, financial accessibility, and educational equity. When students feel that their concerns are heard and addressed, they are more likely to engage in campus life, contribute to the university mission, and develop a stronger sense of institutional belonging.

Collaboration as a Foundation for Successful Implementation

For the Mission-Integrated Leadership Framework to be successfully implemented, institutions must prioritize ongoing dialogue and collaboration among stakeholders. Shared governance models that integrate input from senior leadership, faculty, student affairs professionals, and students will minimize resistance, build trust, and enhance institutional effectiveness.

By fostering cross-campus collaboration, Jesuit institutions can ensure that mission-driven leadership is not just a theoretical model but a practical, embedded framework that strengthens both institutional mission and financial resilience. Establishing clear communication channels, inclusive governance structures, and transparent decision-making processes will be essential in transforming this framework into a long-term institutional commitment. Institutions that successfully align governance, financial planning, and student support structures with their Jesuit identity will be better positioned to navigate future challenges while upholding their mission of ethical leadership and holistic education.

Final Stakeholder Considerations

The successful implementation of the Mission-Integrated Leadership Framework relies on the collaborative efforts of institutional stakeholders to integrate mission-driven decision-making into governance, financial structures, and crisis response planning. Senior leadership, faculty, student affairs professionals, and student representatives each play a vital role in ensuring that institutional priorities remain aligned with Jesuit values while maintaining financial sustainability.

By fostering early engagement, shared governance, and transparent communication, institutions can build trust, minimize resistance, and create a sustainable leadership model that upholds both mission integrity and financial responsibility. The integration of values-based budgeting, equity-centered student support, and participatory governance structures will ensure that Jesuit institutions continue to lead with purpose, resilience, and ethical commitment in both stable and crisis periods.

Solution Challenges and Mitigation Strategies

While the Mission-Integrated Leadership Framework provides a sustainable and mission-driven approach to institutional leadership, its successful implementation requires careful navigation of potential challenges. Institutions must balance tradition with innovation, ensuring that mission-aligned decision-making structures do not disrupt operational efficiency or financial sustainability. Key obstacles include resistance to change among faculty and administrators, financial constraints that may limit the ability to invest in mission-driven initiatives, and the challenge of balancing inclusivity with the need for timely decision-making. To address these concerns, institutions must adopt strategic mitigation strategies, ensuring that the transition to mission-integrated leadership is both practical and sustainable. The table below outlines the primary challenges institutions may face and proposed strategies for overcoming them.

Table 4

Key Implementation Challenges

Challenge	Potential Impact	Mitigation Strategy
Resistance to Change	Faculty and administrators may resist shifting governance and financial planning models.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implement pilot programs before full-scale rollout. • Use data-driven success stories to demonstrate impact.
Financial Constraints	Budget limitations may delay values-based investments.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seek external funding opportunities. • Prioritize low-cost, high-impact initiatives.
Balancing Inclusivity & Efficiency	Expanding stakeholder engagement may slow decision-making.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create structured governance processes to balance input and efficiency.

Timeline for Implementation of the Solution

Successfully implementing the Mission-Integrated Leadership Framework (MILF) requires a phased approach over at least three years, allowing institutions to adapt gradually, address challenges proactively, and ensure long-term sustainability. The first six months ideally will focus on laying the groundwork, including establishing governance structures, conducting financial assessments, and developing a communication strategy to engage stakeholders. The following six to eighteen months will involve pilot testing values-based budgeting at a departmental level, refining governance models, and assessing the initial impact of mission-aligned financial

planning. Finally, between 18 and 36 months, institutions will work toward full institutionalization, scaling successful strategies across all decision-making processes and integrating mission-driven leadership into long-term planning. By implementing this framework in phases, institutions can minimize resistance, optimize resource allocation, and ensure that mission-centered decision-making becomes a sustainable institutional practice.

Table 5

Implementation Schedule

Phase	Focus Area	Timeframe
1. Institutional Integration	Establish permanent mission-aligned governance, budgeting, and student support structures.	0-6 Months
2. Pilot & Refinement	Test values-based budgeting, stakeholder engagement, and governance models in select departments.	6-18 Months
3. Full Implementation	Scale the framework across all decision-making processes, ensuring mission alignment in daily operations and crisis response.	18-36 Months

Implementation of the Solution Conclusion

By implementing this structured, phased approach, Jesuit institutions can support that mission-integrated decision-making as an enduring feature of their governance and financial structures. Rather than introducing abrupt or disruptive changes, this gradual rollout allows institutions to refine policies, gain stakeholder buy-in, and create a more ethical, resilient leadership model.

The key to success lies in strategic planning, cross-campus collaboration, and iterative refinement. Institutions that effectively integrate values-based budgeting, inclusive governance, and mission-aligned crisis leadership will be better positioned to navigate future crises, uphold their Jesuit identity, and foster institutional sustainability while remaining financially responsible and mission-driven.

Evaluating the Outcome of Implementing the Mission-Integrated Leadership Framework (MILF)

To ensure the success and sustainability of the Mission-Integrated Leadership Framework (MILF), Jesuit institutions must implement structured evaluation measures that assess both practical effectiveness and alignment with Jesuit values. The evaluation process should be continuous, data-driven, and mission-centered, allowing institutions to refine their leadership approaches while maintaining financial resilience, stakeholder trust, and student wellbeing.

A robust evaluation strategy should focus on three key dimensions: governance effectiveness, financial sustainability, and student impact. Regular stakeholder surveys, including faculty, staff, and students, can provide valuable insights into how well the governance model fosters transparency, collaboration, and ethical decision-making. Additionally, financial reports should assess whether values-based budgeting leads to long-term institutional stability, ensuring that financial decisions continue to support both mission and operational needs.

Key Evaluation Metrics

To effectively assess the impact of the Mission-Integrated Leadership Framework (MILF), institutions must establish clear, measurable evaluation metrics that track

progress across governance, financial sustainability, student wellbeing, and mission alignment. These metrics ensure that decision-making remains transparent, financially responsible, and deeply rooted in Jesuit values. By systematically measuring outcomes, institutions can identify strengths, address challenges, and continuously refine their leadership approach to sustain mission-driven excellence. The table below outlines the core evaluation dimensions and their expected impact.

Table 6

Key Evaluation Metrics

Evaluation Dimension	Measurement Approach	Implications
Governance Effectiveness	Stakeholder surveys, leadership feedback, faculty and staff engagement levels	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased transparency • Stronger institutional trust, • Improved collaboration across departments
Financial Sustainability	Budget performance reports, endowment growth, financial audits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengthened long-term fiscal stability • Reduced reliance on short-term cost-cutting measures
Student Wellbeing & Success	Mental health service utilization, retention and graduation rates, financial aid distribution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enhanced student engagement • Increased retention • Improved academic performance
Mission Alignment	Annual mission audits, qualitative case studies, policy reviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Institutional decisions consistently reflect Jesuit principles and values

Continuous Improvement & Adaptation

The evaluation of MILF should not be a one-time process, but rather an ongoing cycle of assessment, feedback, and refinement. Institutions should establish regular review periods (e.g., annual or biannual evaluations) to analyze data, identify areas for improvement, and make mission-centered adjustments. Leadership teams should use this data to adapt governance structures, financial planning strategies, and student support services as needed, ensuring that the framework remains responsive, resilient, and deeply aligned with Jesuit values over time.

By embedding evaluation as an integral part of the leadership framework, Jesuit institutions can strengthen the likelihood that their mission-driven approach remains not only ethical and student-centered but also operationally effective and financially sustainable in both stable and uncertain times.

Implications of the Mission-Integrated Leadership Framework (MILF)

Practical Implications

The findings of this study highlight several critical implications for leadership in Jesuit higher education, particularly in fostering mission-integrated, ethical, and financially sustainable decision-making. The Mission-Integrated Leadership Framework (MILF) provides a structured model that helps institutions balance mission-driven values with operational realities, supporting leadership that remains inclusive, financially sound, and student-centered.

First, governance structures must become more inclusive, not only in crisis situations but as a standard leadership approach. Decision-making should not be confined to top administrators but should incorporate faculty, student affairs professionals,

students, and financial leaders. By broadening participation, institutions can improve stakeholder trust, enhance collaboration, and make more well-rounded decisions that reflect the full spectrum of campus needs.

Second, financial sustainability must be viewed as an extension of mission, rather than a competing interest. Institutions that remained committed to their Jesuit values during the pandemic—especially those that prioritized student wellbeing, equity, and holistic education—often found that their long-term financial stability was reinforced, rather than undermined. This insight underscores the importance of adopting *Values-Based Budgeting*, which ensures that budget decisions reflect mission-aligned priorities rather than short-term cost-cutting measures.

Third, transparent and proactive communication is essential in both stable periods and times of uncertainty. This study found that stakeholders—including faculty, staff, and students—responded more positively when leaders provided consistent, transparent, and open communication. Strong communication strategies build trust, manage expectations, and reduce resistance to policy changes, particularly when implementing governance or financial reforms.

Finally, student wellbeing must be embedded in institutional decision-making. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed gaps in mental health resources, financial aid accessibility, and academic flexibility, highlighting the need for mission-driven student support services. Institutions must prioritize *cura personalis* (care for the whole person) by expanding student services that support emotional, financial, and academic success. Ensuring that student wellbeing remains a core component of institutional planning strengthens both student retention and institutional resilience.

These findings suggest that Jesuit higher education leaders must fully embrace inclusive, mission-aligned, and adaptive governance models, ensuring that institutions not only survive challenges but emerge from them stronger, more ethical, and better equipped to fulfill their mission.

Implications for Future Research

This study offers valuable insights into Jesuit mission-driven leadership models, but it also raises important questions that warrant further exploration. Future research should focus on longitudinal studies to examine the evolving impact of values-based budgeting on institutional sustainability. While participants in this study reflected on perceived short-term gains—such as strengthened stakeholder trust and clearer alignment between mission and financial decision-making—further research is needed to assess whether these early outcomes persist over time and how financial stability evolves across Jesuit higher education institutions.

Another key area for future research is the role of inclusive crisis governance models in shaping institutional culture, faculty engagement, and student satisfaction. While this study highlights the benefits of participatory leadership, further exploration is needed to identify the most effective methods for sustaining inclusive decision-making structures without introducing inefficiencies.

Additionally, comparative studies between Jesuit and non-Jesuit institutions—including both secular universities and other faith-based institutions—could help assess whether the Mission-Integrated Leadership Framework is unique to Jesuit settings or if similar leadership principles emerge across different institutional missions. Understanding how various faith traditions and institutional identities shape leadership

decisions would provide a broader perspective on values-driven governance and institutional resilience.

Lastly, future studies could explore the intersection of leadership, student affairs, and financial strategy, particularly in the context of student wellbeing and holistic education. While this study underscores the importance of student support structures, additional research is needed to assess how investments in mental health, financial aid, and student engagement translate into institutional outcomes such as retention rates, academic performance, and alumni engagement.

By expanding research in these areas, scholars and practitioners can continue to refine leadership models that integrate mission, governance, and financial decision-making, ensuring that higher education institutions remain resilient, ethically grounded, and financially sustainable.

Implications for Leadership Theory and Practice

The findings of this study contribute to leadership theory and practice by reinforcing the idea that effective leadership is not solely about financial decision-making or operational efficiency—it is about balancing strategic priorities with deeply held institutional values. This research affirms the relevance of servant leadership and values-based leadership theories in higher education, particularly within mission-driven institutions like Jesuit universities.

One of the key takeaways is that leaders who prioritize ethical decision-making and stakeholder engagement foster greater institutional resilience. This aligns with transformational leadership theory, which suggests that leaders who inspire, motivate, and engage stakeholders in shared decision-making create stronger, more adaptable

organizations. The Jesuit tradition of discernment-based leadership further supports this approach, emphasizing reflection, ethical considerations, and community-driven solutions—all of which were central to the leadership models identified in this study.

Additionally, this study highlights the importance of adaptive leadership theory in responding to rapidly evolving challenges. The COVID-19 pandemic required leaders to adjust policies in real time, manage competing stakeholder demands, and implement flexible decision-making models. Those who succeeded did not rigidly adhere to existing governance structures, but rather embraced flexibility, inclusivity, and mission-aligned leadership approaches.

From a practical standpoint, this study suggests that higher education leadership development programs should incorporate training on:

- Values-Based Budgeting and financial planning that aligns with institutional mission
- Stakeholder engagement and transparent communication strategies
- Inclusive governance models that balance participation with efficiency

By equipping future leaders with these skills, institutions can ensure that leadership remains both ethical and operationally effective.

Ultimately, these findings contribute to bridging the often-cited gap between leadership theory and the practical realities of institutional decision-making during crisis contexts. Rather than viewing values-based leadership as an aspirational ideal, the experiences of participants in this study suggest it can serve as a strategic asset—one that supports financial stewardship, cultivates institutional trust, and sustains mission integrity. The Mission-Integrated Leadership Framework (MILF) reinforces the potential

of ethical, mission-driven leadership to strengthen institutional resilience, offering Jesuit universities a model for aligning decision-making with their foundational values, even under pressure.

Final Thoughts on Implications

The Mission-Integrated Leadership Framework (MILF) offers a sustainable approach to decision-making that ensures Jesuit institutions remain faithful to their mission while navigating financial and operational challenges. The implications of this research emphasize the importance of balancing ethical leadership, financial sustainability, and stakeholder engagement to create institutions that are resilient, mission-driven, and student-centered.

By adopting inclusive governance structures, aligning financial strategies with mission values, prioritizing student wellbeing, and fostering transparent communication, Jesuit higher education institutions can continue to serve as exemplars of ethical, values-based leadership—not only in times of crisis but as a permanent and sustainable leadership philosophy.

Reflections as a Scholar-Practitioner

Conducting this research reinforced the complexities of leadership in higher education, particularly during crisis moments. As a scholar-practitioner, I was struck by the dedication of the Jesuit institutional leader to their mission, even in the face of the significance of the pandemic. COVID-19 tested the limits of institutional mission, revealing the often-precarious tension between idealism and pragmatism. However, what emerged from this study was not simply a dichotomy between mission and business but a

more profound realization: Institutions that leaned into their mission found that their business ultimately became stronger.

This insight challenges the assumption that mission-driven decision-making is inherently at odds with financial sustainability. Instead, the findings suggest that when institutions prioritized their Jesuit values—*cura personalis*, *Magis*, and a commitment to social justice—they reinforced, rather than undermined, their long-term financial and institutional health. Leaders who made decisions grounded in mission did not see their institutions weakened. Instead, they emerged more resilient, aligned with their core purpose, and better positioned to serve their communities in the post-pandemic era.

Moving forward, it is clear that institutions must remain adaptable while staying rooted in their foundational principles. The pandemic forced higher education leaders to navigate uncharted territory, but those who upheld their Jesuit identity found that mission and business were not competing forces but mutually reinforcing ones. Ultimately, this study underscores the importance of mission-driven leadership and responsiveness to real-world challenges. Jesuit institutions have a unique opportunity to lead by example – demonstrating that ethical, student-centered decision-making is not a risk to institutional stability but a pathway to institutional resilience and long-term success.

Summary of the Dissertation in Practice

This study aimed to explore the decision-making processes of executive leaders in Jesuit-affiliated higher education institutions during the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on how they balanced mission-driven values with corporate decision premises. The study sought to understand how leaders navigated ethical dilemmas, stakeholder tensions, and financial constraints while remaining committed to the Jesuit mission. The findings

revealed that mission and business were not opposing forces; instead, institutions that leaned into their Jesuit values often found strengthened long-term sustainability. Leaders who prioritized student wellbeing, transparent communication, and inclusive decision-making upheld their mission and created more resilient and adaptive institutions.

By developing governance structures that integrate Jesuit principles into financial and strategic planning, institutions can ensure that future crises are met with ethical and practical leadership approaches. The study highlights the importance of stakeholder engagement, mission-centered crisis response, and values-driven decision-making as essential components of leadership in Jesuit higher education.

Moving forward, Jesuit institutions must continue cultivating leadership frameworks that embrace mission and operational sustainability. By intentionally understanding how mission-driven decisions influence institutional outcomes, leaders can build more just, ethical, and financially sound universities that remain true to their founding principles while effectively navigating the challenges of higher education in an ever-changing world.

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Appendix A

Bill of Rights for Research Participants

As a participant in a research study, you have the right:

1. To have enough time to decide whether or not to be in the research study, and to make that decision without any pressure from the people who are conducting the research.
2. To refuse to be in the study at all, or to stop participating at any time after you begin the study.
3. To be told what the study is trying to find out, what will happen to you, and what you will be asked to do if you are in the study.
4. To be told about the reasonably foreseeable risks of being in the study.
5. To be told about the possible benefits of being in the study.
6. To be told whether there are any costs associated with being in the study and whether you will be compensated for participating in the study.
7. To be told who will have access to information collected about you and how your confidentiality will be protected.
8. To be told whom to contact with questions about the research, about research-related injury, and about your rights as a research participant.
9. If the study involves treatment or therapy:
 - a. To be told about the other non-research treatment choices you have.
 - b. To be told where treatment is available should you have a research-related injury, and who will pay for research-related treatment.

Appendix B

Email Invitation to Participate in Research Study

Dear [Proposed Participant's Name],

I hope this message finds you well. My name is Lucas Novotny, and I am a doctoral student in the Interdisciplinary Leadership Studies program at Creighton University. For my dissertation, I am conducting a study to explore how mission-informed decision-making influenced the responses of student services administrators at Jesuit-affiliated higher education institutions during the COVID-19 pandemic.

As an executive involved in significant decision-making during this period, your insights would be invaluable to my research. I would like to invite you to participate in a one-hour interview where we will discuss your experiences and perspectives on how mission-oriented decision-making was present in institutional responses to the pandemic. Your participation may help enhance understanding of the integration of mission and management in higher education during times of crisis.

To ensure that you are fully informed, I have attached the Social Behavioral Informed Consent Form and the Bill of Rights for Research Participants. These documents provide additional details about the study, including how your confidentiality will be maintained and what to expect during the interview.

If you are willing to participate, please let me know your availability so we can schedule a convenient time for the interview. I am happy to conduct the interview via Zoom or another virtual platform that suits you best.

Thank you very much for considering this request. I look forward to the possibility of discussing this important topic with you. Please feel free to reach out if you have any questions or need further information.

Take Care,



Lucas Novotny
Doctoral Student – Interdisciplinary Leadership Studies
Creighton University
LucasNovotny@creighton.edu
402.830.7122

Appendix C

Follow-Up to Invitation to Participate in Research Study (E-Mail distribution)

Dear [Proposed Participant's Name],

I hope this message finds you well. I am writing to follow up on the email I sent on [Insert Date] regarding your potential participation in my research study.

As a reminder, I am conducting a study for my dissertation in the Interdisciplinary Leadership Studies program at Creighton University. My research focuses on how mission-informed decision-making was present in the responses of student affairs administrators at Jesuit-affiliated higher education institutions during the COVID-19 pandemic. I am seeking your valuable insights through a 60-minute interview to help understand this impact.

I have attached the Social Behavioral Informed Consent Form and the Bill of Rights for Research Participants for your review. These documents provide further details about the study, including confidentiality measures and what to expect.

If you are interested in participating, please let me know your availability, and I will be happy to arrange a convenient time for the interview. If you have any questions or need additional information, please feel free to reach out.

Thank you for considering this request. I look forward to your response.

Take care,

Lucas Novotny
Doctoral Student – Interdisciplinary Leadership Studies
Creighton University
LucasNovotny@creighton.edu
402.830.7122

Appendix D

Social Behavioral Informed Consent Form

Dear Proposed Participant,

The following information is provided for you to determine whether you wish to take part in the research study titled "Anchored in Mission: Decision-Making Among Student Affairs Administrators in Jesuit Universities During the COVID-19 Crisis" (Research Number 2004864). This study explores how mission-informed decision-making was utilized by student affairs administrators at Jesuit-affiliated institutions during the COVID-19 pandemic. You are invited to participate because you meet the study's selection criteria as an executive involved in significant decision-making within a Jesuit-affiliated higher education institution during the pandemic. Please note that your participation is voluntary, and even if you consent initially, you may withdraw from the study at any time.

You are requested to participate in one interview expected to last up to 60 minutes. Follow-up questions may be sought for clarification purposes as needed. The interview will involve open-ended questions to explore your experiences and perspectives on mission-informed decision-making during the pandemic.

The risks to you as a participant are minimal. There are no anticipated physical risks. To protect your confidentiality, all responses will be treated confidentially with no attribution made to specific participants. Your identity will be masked when presenting comments in the research findings, and pseudonyms will be used. Data will be stored securely in a password-protected cloud drive, and all identifiers will be removed. At the study's conclusion, all audio and data files will be destroyed.

While no explicit compensation for participating in the study will be offered, the results could benefit you and your institution by providing insights into how mission-oriented decision-making influenced institutional responses during the pandemic. The study may also contribute to the academic community by enhancing understanding of the integration of mission and management in higher education.

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You may withdraw from the study at any time without any penalty. Additionally, you may choose to skip any questions you find sensitive or uncomfortable.

Please contact me with any questions or to request information about my study at (402) 830-7122 or LucasNovotny@creighton.edu. If you have any questions about the rights of research participants, you can contact the Institutional Review Board at 402-280-2126. I would appreciate you letting me know of your willingness to participate at your earliest convenience.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Lucas Novotny

Doctoral Student – Interdisciplinary Leadership Studies | Creighton University

Appendix E

Interview Protocol

Interview Identifier: A pseudonym will be used to preserve confidentiality.

Protocol Description: Investigation of mission-informed decision-making among student affairs administrators at Jesuit-affiliated higher education institutions during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Time of Interview: To be determined

Date: To be determined

Place: Videoconference (Zoom)

Interviewer: Lucas Novotny

Interviewees: Executives from student affairs divisions at Jesuit-affiliated higher education institutions

Position of Interviewees: Executives involved in significant decision-making during the COVID-19 pandemic

Interview Introduction:

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. I am conducting research to understand how mission-informed decision-making was present in the responses of student affairs administrators at Jesuit-affiliated higher education institutions during the COVID-19 pandemic. This interview aims to explore your experiences and perspectives regarding how mission-oriented values shaped your decision-making processes during this challenging time. Your responses will remain confidential, and you can choose to skip any questions or withdraw from the study at any time. May I have your permission

to record this interview for transcription purposes? The recordings will be destroyed at the conclusion of the study. Do you have any questions or concerns before we begin?

Questions:

1. Tell me about your institution – its mission, size, and the key student services you offer(ed).
2. What is/was your current role within the student affairs division, and how, if at all, has your role evolved since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic?
3. How would you describe the way mission-oriented values and principles integrated into decision-making processes within your institution during the pandemic?
4. How do you feel that your institution's mission influenced the decisions made regarding student services during COVID-19?
5. Were there specific challenges in aligning decision-making with the institution's mission during the pandemic? Could you describe those?
6. In your observation, what primary decision-making criteria used to address pandemic-related challenges, and how did mission-informed values factor into these criteria?
7. How would you say your institution balanced mission-driven goals with practical considerations, such as health and safety, financial stability, and remote learning requirements?
8. Can you point to which mission-informed values, if any, evident in specific decisions taken by your institution in response to the pandemic?

9. What communication strategies were employed to ensure that mission-informed decisions were effectively conveyed to the campus community during the pandemic?
10. Did your institution measure the effectiveness of the mission-informed decisions made during the pandemic? What indicators or feedback mechanisms were used?
11. Were adjustments or modifications made to decision-making processes as the pandemic evolved, and if so, as you saw it, what would you say about how these adjustments aligned with the institution's mission?
12. How did the decision-making group address any conflicts or tensions between mission-oriented goals and practical challenges during the decision-making process?
13. Based on your experience during the pandemic, how would you assess the overall impact of mission-informed decision-making on your institution's response to the COVID-19 pandemic?

Closing Comments:

Thank you for your valuable insights and participation in this study. I may reach out to you for clarification on your responses after analyzing the interview transcripts. I will also share the final study with you once it is completed. If you have any additional questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me.

Clarifying Questions to Encourage In-depth Responses:

- Could you provide specific examples or details?

- What makes you say that?
- Can you elaborate on how this decision was influenced by the mission?
- What were the outcomes or impacts of these mission-driven decisions?

Appendix F

Eligibility Criteria for Senior Student Affairs Officers (SSAOs)

To ensure that participants have relevant experience in student affairs leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic, individuals nominated for participation must meet the following criteria:

Institutional Affiliation

- The participant must have served as a Senior Student Affairs Officers (SSAO) at one of the 27 Jesuit higher education institutions in the United States (AJCU, n.d.).
- The participant must have held this position during the COVID-19 pandemic (2019–2022).

Leadership Role in Institutional Decision-Making

- The participant must have played a direct role in shaping student affairs policies and institutional responses to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- The participant must have been involved in decision-making processes related to student support, campus life, and crisis management.
- The participant must have engaged with institutional leadership (e.g., presidents, provosts, cabinet-level administrators) or cross-functional teams in addressing student affairs challenges during the pandemic.

Scope of Responsibilities

- The participant must have oversight of student-facing programs and services, such as residence life, student health and wellness, counseling services, student conduct, or co-curricular engagement.
- The participant must have been responsible for implementing, adapting, or advising on policies and initiatives affecting students' experiences during the pandemic (e.g., remote learning adjustments, housing policies, health and safety measures).

Experience with Crisis Response & Institutional Adaptation

- The participant must have been actively involved in responding to pandemic-related disruptions in student affairs, including but not limited to:
 - a. Managing student affairs staffing and operational challenges.
 - b. Addressing student well-being and mental health concerns.
 - c. Implementing emergency response strategies.
- The participant must be able to reflect on how institutional mission, values, or Jesuit identity influenced decision-making during the pandemic.

Willingness to Participate in the Study

- The participant must be willing to engage in an individual interview and share reflections on their experiences.
- The participant must be able to provide informed consent to participate in the study, per institutional research ethics guidelines.

Appendix G

IRB Approval

EXEMPT NOTICE

DATE: 03-SEP-2024

TO: LUCAS NOVOTNY

FROM: SOCIAL BEHAVIORAL IRB

PROTOCOL NUMBER: 2004864-01

PROJECT TITLE: Anchored in Mission: Decision-Making Among Student Affairs Administrators in Jesuit Universities During the COVID-19 Crisis

DETERMINATION: EXEMPT

EXEMPT CATEGORY: 2ii

The following documents were reviewed with this submission:

-Creighton University HS eForm and documents attached therein.

This memorandum is a notification that the protocol referenced above has been reviewed as indicated in Federal regulatory statutes at 45CFR46.104(d) and deemed exempt from ongoing IRB review. You are therefore authorized to begin the research.

As an exempt study, there is no requirement for continuing review. Your protocol will remain on file with the IRB as a matter of record. Although your study is exempt from ongoing review, you and your research team are not exempt from ethical research practices and should therefore employ all protections for your participants and their data which are appropriate to your research.

The following conditions apply to all IRB submissions:

1. No subjects may be involved in any study procedure prior to the IRB exempt determination date.
2. Only the Consent/Information Sheet/Assent/Parental Permission forms and recruitment materials submitted with this review (as applicable) may be used to enroll subjects.
3. All protocol modifications must be IRB reviewed and approved prior to implementation. This includes any change of investigator or site address.
4. All recruitment materials and methods must be reviewed and approved by the IRB prior to being used.

Should any changes need to be made to the study, please submit a Request for Modification within InfoEd. Any changes to the application may cause this protocol to require a different level of IRB review.

While not required, when the above-referenced protocol has been completed, please submit a Request for Study Closure.

Please be advised you will be asked to update the status of your research yearly by responding to an email from the IRB office. If you do not respond, your project will be considered completed and closed.

If you wish to appeal the Board's determination and/or the Board's required changes to your study or study documents (as applicable), you may do so by submitting a Request for Modifications in InfoEd. If you have questions about this approval or filing an appeal, please contact the IRB at irb@creighton.edu or 402-280-2126.

Sincerely,
Creighton University IRB

A copy of this letter will be retained in Creighton University's IRB records as per the requirements established at 45 CFR 46.115. Please be aware that under Nebraska State Law investigators are required to retain copies of all exempt study documents for a period of three years.