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## The Infinite Mindset: A Phenomenological Study of Exemplary Student Affairs Leaders

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The Infinite Mindset: A Phenomenological Study of Exemplary Student Affairs Leaders

A Dissertation by

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Irvine, California

School of Education

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership

April 2023

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April 2023

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*\*cue the 8-clap\** and fight on!

## ABSTRACT

The Infinite Mindset: A Phenomenological Study of Exemplary Student Affairs Leaders

by Kevin Giang

**Purpose:** The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore and describe how exemplary leaders in the field of student affairs perceive the practices of Simon Sinek's Infinite Mindset Framework are embedded within their organizations to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results. A further purpose of this study was to understand the organizational supports and barriers these exemplary leaders perceive affect the development of an infinite mindset.

**Methodology:** Interviews were used to explore and describe how exemplary student affairs leaders perceive the five practices of Sinek's Infinite Mindset are embedded within their organizations. The study seeks to explore and make a scholarly contribution to existing theories of leadership (Patton, 2015). The research is qualitative and the phenomenological approach examines individuals' experiences and investigates the problems connected to the experience to increase overall understanding (Ungvarsky, 2020).

**Findings:** The qualitative data of 12 student affairs leaders was examined. These leaders: use mission, vision, and values to bring together stakeholders; use the student-centered approach through feedback and evaluation; use their institutions' culture at the top as guidance to find meaning; implement building of trusting teams by focusing on relationships; focus on consistent communication with stakeholders; collaborate across departments to better understand and serve student needs; use student feedback to better support future generations of students; expect members of their organization to create

robust experiences for students through modeling and mentoring; and perceive that relationships serve as the foundation to sustained success.

**Conclusions:** It was concluded that exemplary student affairs leaders who engage in the following actions achieve extraordinary results: align the work to being student-centered; perceive relationships as the foundation of the work; bring together diverse experiences and skills; pivot and adapt in response to evaluation; consider the impact of the campus culture; and nurture professional development within their organizations.

**Recommendations:** Further research is recommended to: study student affairs leaders at a single institution type; by association region; by functional area; study deans, presidents, and chancellors; conduct a thematic meta-analysis; and build the literature on the Infinite Mindset.

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## PREFACE

Following discussions and considerations regarding the opportunity to study Sinek's (2019) infinite mindset framework, four faculty researchers and eight doctoral students discovered a common interest in exploring how exemplary leaders perceive the practice of the five infinite mindset practices of advancing a just cause, build trusting teams, study your worthy rival, preparing for existential flexibility, and demonstrating the courage to lead are embedded within their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results. Additionally, the researchers were also tasked with exploring the organizational supports and barriers exemplary leaders perceive affect the development of the infinite mindset within their organization. This resulted in a thematic study conducted by a research team of eight doctoral students.

The eight peer researchers and four faculty advisors ultimately chose a phenomenological design that would be most appropriate for this study of the infinite mindset constructs and their perceived impact and how they establish a culture of extraordinary results (Patton, 2015). The structure was resolved to be generally suitable as a non-experimental, descriptive approach to best accumulate the lived experiences of the leaders. Each researcher interviewed 12 leaders to describe how the five practices of the infinite mindset were embedded within their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results within their organizations. The team co-created the purpose statement, research questions, definitions, interview questions, and study procedures to ensure thematic consistency. The thematic team agreed that data collection would involve interviews and artifacts, increasing the validity of the thematic research study.

The term “peer researchers” refers to the other researchers who conducted this thematic study. These were: Jeff Heilig, Elementary Principals in South Los Angeles County, CA; Kevin Giang, Student Affairs Leaders at University and College Institutions in Los Angeles County, CA; Amna Osman, Elementary Principals in Monterey County, CA; Lindsey Gatfield, Elementary Title 1 Principals in Orange County, CA; Marc Patterson, K – 12 Superintendents in Los Angeles County, CA; Renée Gates, Alternative High School Principals in Orange County, CA & Riverside County, CA; Christina Gfell, Comprehensive High School Principals in North Orange County, CA; and Ricardo Espinosa, Community College Professors in the North Bay Area, CA.



## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Leaders across the American landscape of higher education have seen declining enrollment rates, rising education costs, and intensified student needs, calling for the need to “adapt to new realities [such as] ... the diversity of [institutions’] students and to the financial and equity challenges [of these institutions]” (Mintz, 2021, para. 21). Although institutions of higher education (IHEs) in California have increased access to academia to a diverse population of students by way of community colleges, the California State University system, the University of California system, and independent, private institutions, the state has been unable to “set goals and coordinate its many systems” (Public Policy Institute of California, 2019, p. 3). This situation has led to increasing challenges for IHEs to adequately support student communities at all levels of access.

Student affairs professionals must balance meeting the needs of individual students and navigating both internal campus and external politics at a time when student communities on college campuses are diversifying in terms of lived experiences, identities, and support needs (Long, 2012, p. 28-34). An emerging issue in the field of student affairs is the individual students’ reliance on technology use (i.e., cell phones and social media) as well as legal ramifications regarding student privacy (Harper, 2004; Long, 2012). The transition into a four-year IHE usually serves as the first-time students are leaving their homes and parental figures, leaving them to seek out a new sense of community through technology and social media.

Leaders in this field are charged with the mission to meet student needs and diversify student support programs and initiatives as new classes of students enter higher education for the first time. Diversifying student support programs and initiatives

includes the expansion and implementation of centers, support groups, and mentorship programs that focus on aspects of student wellbeing, identity, and academics (Crisp et al., 2020). These leaders face the challenge of sustaining success by the standards and values of their respective institutions with robust programs and departments to support student safety and retention during their time on campus.

The inception of student affairs as a profession within higher education comes from a publication by the American Council on Education in 1937, titled *Student Personnel Point of View* (Long, 2012). In this report, professionals in the field of student affairs were guided to support and embrace the whole student, beyond academia and educational curricula. Decades of student activism on college campuses and the development of faculty tenure have positioned the student affairs profession as a catch-all for campus services, initiatives, and co-curricular support processes (Harper, 2004). The field of student affairs continues to grow and develop to keep up with growing trends in student needs across college campuses, like academic support, diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) challenges, and mental health concerns (Stewart-Tillman & Joyce, 2017).

As student affairs leaders are developing an understanding of emerging trends in higher education, they must navigate campus climate and institutional culture, which are unique to each campus. Institutional culture can take years to change, but organizations and departments within the field of student affairs operate through student-driven initiatives and efforts, creating a dynamic organization that is bounded to changes in “policy decisions, technology, and organizational structures” (Long, 2012, p. 14). The dynamic nature of these institutions creates a space where leaders need to be able to take creative liberties to address the diverse needs of their institutions’ student communities.

Leaders in higher education are positioned to serve within a “contested space on campus and within the profession” (Harper, 2004, p. 2). These student affairs leaders are driven by their passions to support students in higher education in a unique role that would allow them to enact change for the success of both the student population and the institutions they serve. However, serving in this catch-all capacity for student support and co-curricular services could lead student affairs professionals to burn out.

Bounded by personal commitment to the core values of student affairs and the political nature of higher education institutions, these leaders need to embody a range of decision-making and management practices in their day-to-day responsibilities. The role of a leader in the field of student affairs is influenced by organizational politics, external social justice movements, and the socioemotional well-being of the institution’s constituents (Harper, 2004; Kouzes & Posner, 2012; Long, 2012). Analyzing the lived experiences of these student affairs leaders can reveal how their leadership skills contribute to the successes of the students they support and the institutions and organizations of which they are a part.

### **Background**

Leadership can be described in a variety of perspectives, ranging from practices and behaviors to results and outputs (Burns, 1978; Rauch & Behling, 1984). Student affairs leaders are tasked to change and adapt to the trends in higher education policy and diverse student needs as colleges and universities face growing political and financial pressures (Harper, 2004; Long, 2012). The situational pressures and personal interest in supporting student communities amongst these leaders in higher education can be studied through the lens of a set of leadership models and theories.

## **Theoretical Foundations**

Leadership models and theories provide a way to understand the lived experiences of leaders, including those in higher education. Although transformational leadership, servant leadership, and authentic leadership have overlapping characteristics, the differences among them provide a clearer understanding of how leaders utilize different behaviors and skills within their roles. Student affairs leaders develop an understanding of themselves during their time as both students and professionals in higher education to embody their current leadership approaches. The understanding of leadership is guided by theories like the happenstance learning theory and path-goal theory, as well as a set of personal ideas and belief in a growth mindset (Dweck, 2006; House, 1971; Krumboltz, 2009).

### ***Transformational Leadership***

Deriving the concept of transformational leadership from the differentiation between transactional and transforming leadership practices and skills, Burns (1978) noted that leadership decision-making and behaviors can be described as either a simple exchange of services and resources or a gesture in the greater scheme of changing organizational culture and values, respectively. Bass (1985) expanded on transformational leadership to include organizational followership and understanding leadership influence in an organization. Transformational leaders, particularly ones in the field of student affairs, embody practices that should meet the ever-changing needs of the student populations at their institutions. The dynamic nature of leaders meeting the needs of the institution's constituents and understanding the trends in higher education not only

creates a space for transformational leaders but also may require them for institutional success.

### ***Servant Leadership***

Placing service to others and an organization at the forefront of decision-making, servant leadership focuses on prioritizing the needs of others (Greenleaf, 1970).

Greenleaf (2002) expanded his exploration of this concept by focusing on the leader's psyche and their decision to lead and their decision to lead and prioritize others. Servant leaders not only place the needs of others as a priority, but also consider how service can best lead to others' growth and development. The core value of this model stems from a place of care, which is embodied by leader intentionality for others (Greenleaf, 1970). This leadership model builds upon a crucial element in the leader's ability to influence an organization or audience by motivating others to then become servants themselves for others in their respective lives.

### ***Authentic Leadership***

The perceptions of one's own and others' experiences allow a leader to focus on how shaping organizations can produce various results. Erickson (1995) highlighted the importance of authenticity in how individuals can embody their desires and passions in all facets of their lives. Through authentic leadership, the individual can exhibit actions and behaviors revealing their commitments to themselves and the members of their organization. The leader's commitment to the organization and its members was highlighted in a study focused on inherent morality and selflessness and their positive effects on organizational operations (Cavazotte et al., 2021). The authentic leader in the field of student affairs would embody the institutional knowledge to propel student

support programs and initiatives forward through their alignment with organization as a whole.

### ***Happenstance Learning Theory***

Leaders within organizations across different fields and specialties may describe their ascent into administrative or leadership roles as a series of opportunities and risks that they took for professional advancement. Whether or not these experiences were intentional, the student affairs leaders were able to experience leadership or management roles in their own way. Krumboltz's (2009) opportunistic perspective, as articulated in the happenstance learning theory indicates that successful professional and personal development opportunities are oftentimes unplanned and satisfying when taken. Fusco et al. (2015) went on to describe how happenstance and opportunity allow the individual to establish what it means to be authentic. Through the process of trial-and-error, the leader is able to distinguish between opportunities that are beneficial or harmful to the growth and development of their own and others' professional experiences. This understanding of leader's lived experiences can reveal how certain behaviors and skills have developed in order for the leader to contribute to the success of their institution (Magnuson et al., 2003).

### ***Path-Goal Theory***

The degree of alignment between the leader and their organization will affect how the leader will make use of opportunities and risks presented to them. By considering the various personal and personnel elements, the leader can consider concepts within House's (1971) path-goal theory, wherein leader effectiveness is informed by approaches taken to work with organizations and achieve member satisfaction. Moving on from developing

an understanding of what it means to be authentic to oneself and for others, leaders can then regulate what actions and behaviors embody the practices that allow an organization to thrive and grow. By perceiving what an organization needs to adapt to challenges, the leader is able to guide an organization sustainably over time as well as sustain their own professional development (Saleem et al., 2021).

### ***Growth Mindset***

The leader's mindset as a set of ideas and beliefs plays a crucial role in understanding leadership behaviors and skills, because it focuses toward attitudes and perspectives on different situations and opportunities in which the leader may be engaged (Dweck, 2006). Dweck's (2006) growth mindset was developed from an understanding of self-perception and how individuals find success based on these perceptions. This concept stems from an individual's understanding of their intelligence, skills, and abilities as they fit into a greater community and their perception of whether they measure up or compare well to others. Driven by opportunity and challenge, the growth mindset situates the individual into a place where they can best understand their own behaviors and practices and how they can best cater to a group or organization (Dweck, 2007).

### **Theoretical Framework: Infinite Mindset**

The Infinite Mindset framework developed by Simon Sinek (2019) focuses on embodied leadership practices that result in organizational success. This framework consists of five practices: advancing a just cause, building trusting teams, studying a worthy rival, preparing for existential flexibility, and demonstrating the courage to lead. The Infinite Mindset is based on the concept of finite and infinite games, which are

defined by the purpose of winning and continuing or sustaining, respectively (Carse, 1986). In the finite game, players or individuals of an organization are driven by their will and resources to achieve an end result or outcome, whereas in the infinite game, players are working to keep the game or operation in play. The infinite game is one that focuses on sustained growth and development, which would orient the organization to finding success by understanding what is needed to continue playing the game (Carse, 1986; Sinek, 2019).

Within this framework, the leader embodies the set of leadership practices and self-perceptions regarding leadership experiences and skills needed to bring about extraordinary results for their organization under the rules of the infinite game, where success is defined by organizational development and sustainment (Dweck, 2007; Grigorescu, 2020). Basing organizational success on the terms of winning and losing in the field of higher education as a finite game restricts how the clients of the organization or institution (i.e., the students), are being supported. The leader needs to be aware of their role in the finite or infinite game that they are playing in.

### ***Just Cause***

Focused on the organization, the first practice is advancing a just cause, which considers the overarching mission and vision upon which the collective has agreed and toward which it is working actively (Sinek, 2019). The leader's and members' commitments to the organization are defined by whether each individual deems the organization's mission as a worthy cause that they could support. Without this alignment between personal and organizational vision, there will be a lack of commitment that will lead to a dissociation between the personal and professional efforts that are exhibited



throughout an individual's life. A shared vision of an idealized future motivates followers to commit to the organization and make sacrifices to achieve it (Carse, 1986; Finnigan & Stewart, 2009; Noghiu, 2020; Sinek, 2019).

### ***Trusting Teams***

Sinek's (2019) second practice of the infinite mindset framework is building trusting teams, which is oriented within the infinite game by the awareness that trust relies on the safety and security members of the organization have with one another. The embodiment of this trust as an organization leads to results that outwardly indicate that the collective approaches work in a way that is not only authentic, but also drives an inherent care for members of the organization and others. The trusting team is characterized with a collection of team skills like active listening and accountability, which allows for interpersonal relationships to develop a sense of care for one another (Fehr, 2018; Lencioni, 2002; Sinek, 2019).

### ***Worthy Rival***

Centering onto the experiences of leaders themselves, Sinek's (2019) third practice of studying a worthy rival entails increasing a leader's awareness of what they lack in comparison to what others do well. The competitor or rival is an equivalent to the leader but serves as an example of what is working in achieving results in the workplace. This competitor relationship reveals opportunities to grow and develop as a leader because it will reveal what areas can be improved. Measuring success between two rival leaders means ascertaining a level of respect for one another to propel leadership development within each of the leaders. These rivals inspire other leaders and players by

identifying practices and skills that could drive success in their own organizations (Millennial Executive, 2021; Sinek, 2019).

### ***Existential Flexibility***

Handling innovation and creativity in the workplace requires what Sinek (2019) calls existential flexibility. By addressing the development of new external forces and standards, the organization can begin to reexamine what internal strategies and processes can be adjusted or redesigned to best foster future growth. Sinek (2019) identified flexibility as the willingness to erase or reimagine internal progress to meet new challenges and become more innovative by driving the organization in a new direction. The leader's flexibility and overall understanding of the organization rely on the leader's skills and abilities to guide members or followers with the commitment to the just cause (Dhiman, 2011; Goleman, 1995; Sinek, 2019).

### ***Courage to Lead***

More often than not, the finite game is restricted to making a profit or achieving some numerical result or outcome that is deemed successful. Sinek (2019) noted that it takes courage to face the reality that there is more to an organizational effort than making a profit from action. By examining the responsibilities of the leader, the members of the organization, and the organization as a whole, the courage to lead against the finite game and look beyond toward the infinite game prepares the organization to make a lasting impact and minimizes the amount of personnel and resource turnover. The embodiment of this practice again stems from both the personal and professional commitments of the team, including those of the leader, to the organization's overarching mission (Lassiter, 2021; Newsome, 2020). This mission is predicated on a just cause that extends beyond

the confines of financial profit and success in numbers. The courage to lead is predicated on going against what has been traditionally accepted as a normal or preferred process or mindset. This practice draws on the leader's past experiences and confidence in their own perceptions in their leadership roles to take risks for success (Lassiter, 2021; Sinek, 2019).

### **Exemplary Student Affairs Leaders**

The foundation of student affairs leaders' approaches in working with college-level students in various capacities stems from Tierney and Bensimon's (1996) work on professional socialization into the field of higher education as new practitioners. These practitioners build upon their personal experiences as students at an institution as an entryway into the field of professional practice as they find certain pipelines into an otherwise niche field (Liddell et al., 2014).

Kuk and Banning (2009) are experts in student affairs research regarding competency and assessment related to the success and promotion of practitioners in the field. Through the alignment of professional associations, graduate curricula, and workplace experiences, Kuk and Banning (2009) believe that entry into the field of student affairs is dictated by centralized outcomes and achievements to progress from a student to a professional. However, the diversity in professional experiences and educational attainment among entry-level practitioners creates an unclear pathway for professional growth and development within the field of student affairs. As these practitioners move through their careers into leadership roles, their lived experiences can reveal some of the embodied leadership practices that have led to their sustained success in the field of student affairs.

Newsome (2020) indicated how the concept of the infinite game and striving for an ongoing loop of commitment and encouragement between the mentor and mentee contributes to the systematic advancement of individuals in the academic realm. Donohue (2020) posited that situations and lived experiences can be perceived as critical moments in the infinite or finite game. This flexibility of experience allows for both macro- and micro-observations of leaders' organizational experiences. Paired with Grigorescu's (2020) perspective on motivation in the infinite game, the individual's commitment to the organization and its members or playing the infinite game ultimately comes from intrinsic motivation. By understanding the leader's unique lived experiences, this study can begin to uncover how Sinek's (2019) practices are embodied in the day-to-day behaviors the leader exhibits within their institutions and contribute to the success of their respective institutions.

### **Statement of the Research Problem**

The call for a more educated workforce across most industries and careers in the United States has pressured the American higher education system to adapt in a variety of ways to address falling enrollment rates and rising tuition costs that serve as barriers to educational attainment (Mintz, 2018). For example, certification programs and project-based and experiential learning cater to students looking for an alternative to traditional lectures and coursework at most four-year institutions (Long, 2012; Mintz, 2018). Pivoting to the need for higher education curricula to meet workforce standards, student support programs need to follow suit to ensure student communities are adequately supported.

As student needs in higher education diversify with developing trends in mental health concerns and increased education policies around campus safety and financial aid, student affairs leaders must guide their respective organizations to support the student community and meet the expectations of their institutions. The environment where student affairs leaders play the infinite or finite game is compounded by politics and pressures from multiple internal and external parties (Harper, 2004; Long, 2012). Student affairs leaders occupy spaces within their respective universities and colleges that oftentimes calls for adaptability and institutional knowledge to be successful (Harper, 2004; Long, 2012). Navigating this space to support diverse student populations and operating under policies of higher education and their respective institutions, student affairs leaders need to be able to employ strategies to meet student needs, but also be adaptable as students' and institutional needs change.

As more contemporary leadership models and theories come about to better explain the behaviors and skills that leaders use in their roles, research is needed to understand how effective these models and theories are for leaders across different industries and fields. Building upon leadership models and theories in the literature, Sinek (2019) bounds the leader to the concept of the infinite game centered around the ability to sustain an organization in a rapidly changing and unpredictable future. Sinek's (2019) Infinite Mindset framework stems from previous leadership models like the transformational and servant leadership models. Sinek's (2019) framework outlines five practices that leaders can embody to bring about extraordinary results for their organizations.

The field of higher education is dynamic, given the influences and pressures of federal and state politics and an array of campus climate elements, ranging from student-driven movements and initiatives to crises of concern around student safety and engagement (Chan, 2016; Harper, 2004; Long, 2012). Student affairs leaders then serve as players in the infinite game of higher education, with the intention of driving sustained development of their student support programs. Connecting the lived experiences of student affairs leaders to the practices of the Infinite Mindset and perceiving institutions of higher education as places to play the infinite game, future student affairs leaders can begin to develop their skills to yield successful results for their organizations (Carse, 1986; Sinek, 2019).

The Infinite Mindset framework is a fairly new concept that is derived from other leadership models and theories (Sinek, 2019). The five individual practices outlined in this framework have not been studied within the population of student affairs leaders operating in the field of higher education, so there is a lack of research around these leaders' awareness in embodying each of the practices. Analyzing the lived experiences of these student affairs leaders may reveal how the Infinite Mindset and its practices are embodied contributing to the success of the institutions they represent.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore and describe how exemplary leaders in the field of student affairs perceive the practices of Simon Sinek's Infinite Mindset Framework are embedded within their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results. A further purpose of this study was to understand

the organizational supports and barriers these exemplary leaders perceive affect the development of an infinite mindset.

### **Central Research Question**

How do successful leaders perceive the practices of an infinite mindset are embedded within their organization to achieve extraordinary results?

### **Research Sub Questions**

1. How do exemplary student affairs leaders perceive the practice of Advance a Just Cause is embedded within their organization to inspire achievement of extraordinary results?
2. How do exemplary student affairs leaders perceive the practice of Build Trusting Teams is embedded within their organization to inspire achievement of extraordinary results?
3. How do exemplary student affairs leaders perceive the practice of Study Your Worthy Rival is embedded within their organization to inspire achievement of extraordinary results?
4. How do exemplary student affairs leaders perceive the practice of Preparing for Existential Flexibility is embedded within their organization to inspire achievement of extraordinary results?
5. How do exemplary student affairs leaders perceive the practice of Demonstrating the Courage to Lead is embedded within their organization to inspire achievement of extraordinary results?
6. What supports and barriers do exemplary leaders perceive affect the embedding of infinite mindset practices within their organization?

## **Significance of the Problem**

Higher education serves the purposes of developing students for public service and preparing them for success in the professional workplace (Chan, 2016; Long, 2012). This perspective on higher education has been compounded by a competing commitment by the institutions of higher education that need to address developing trends in education policy and student needs. This student-centered perspective has been disputed among institutional leaders, where universities and colleges have become corporate entities focused on the sustained growth of their organizations (Chan, 2016; Kezar, 2004). According to the Public Policy Institute of California (2019), leaders in higher education and policymakers should coordinate efforts in aligning student needs with institutional values and goals.

The role of the student affairs leader is operationalized at the program- and initiative-level where the alignment of meeting student needs and institutional expectations can occur. Student affairs leaders have a vested interest in the sustained growth of their respective institutions in meeting the challenges of new education policies and mounting economic goals and the socioemotional wellbeing of departmental staff members and the student community (Chan, 2016; Harper, 2004; Long, 2012). Balancing the role of advocating for student communities and representing institutional administrators, the student affairs leader must navigate their role amidst oftentimes competing priorities and pressures from declining enrollment at IHEs, which could lead to staffing and resource cutbacks (Long, 2012). As the institution builds on the desire to increase student enrollment and meet economic goals, the student affairs leader strives to address the growing disparities in student achievement attributed to increasing diversity



in identities and lived experiences among student populations across different campuses (Mintz, 2018). These professional actions and operations reveal how student affairs leaders adapt and pivot their leadership skills in times of crisis at their respective institutions (Kuk & Banning, 2009; Liddell et al., 2014; Tierney & Bensimon, 1996).

This study will contribute to the lack of literature in understanding the Infinite Mindset framework and how it can be used to examine leaders in the field of higher education. The current literature illustrates the pathways and trends in professional development among entry- and mid-level student affairs practitioners, but lacks the connection to foundational frameworks and theories to understand their leadership development as student affairs programs begin to become more robust across college campuses (Kuk & Banning, 2009). This study will provide valuable information about the lived experiences of exemplary student affairs leaders and how they use the practices of the Infinite Mindset to operationalize their role to meet student needs and institutional goals, achieving extraordinary results at their respective institutions.

The findings from this study could guide entry- and mid-level student affairs practitioners to become successful leaders of student programs and initiative through a shared understanding of how leadership practices and behaviors are embodied to bring about extraordinary results. Additionally, this study may build upon Kuk and Banning's (2009) student affairs pathways to leadership roles within the field by providing a set of leadership practices and tangible examples of lived experiences from which student affairs practitioners can learn from to develop within their respective roles. Bringing awareness to these lived experiences will reveal to administrators across different

universities and colleges what kinds of leadership practices and experiences yield successful results for both institutions and student communities.

As the demand for masters-level practitioners over professionals without graduate degrees in the field of student affairs grows due to the need for more preparation to support student communities across different campuses, a range of skills and competencies are developed across different graduate-level preparation programs for student affairs and higher education administration (Long, 2012; Muller et al., 2017). For example, practitioners can learn how to lead with an infinite mindset embodying its five practices in providing dynamic academic and cocurricular support services that are adaptable to each student with whom they interact, being cognizant of the diversity in identities and perceptions that have impacted the student's experiences at their respective institutions.

Professional organizations, like the American College Personnel Association (ACPA) and the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA), could use the results of this study as a starting point to standardize student affairs skills and competencies throughout a variety of program areas in higher education. This would ensure that graduate students in these related programs of study would be well equipped for professional development as they navigate the profession. As these graduate students enter the competitive job market in a niche field like student affairs, developing a core set of skills and competencies through their studies and their participation in professional organizations will facilitate their successful transition into a professional role.

## Definitions

The following section defines the terms developed by a group of peer researchers studying elements of the infinite mindset. The definitions are organized by Sinek's (2019) concept of the infinite mindset and its five elements. Additional terms relevant to this study are also defined.

### Infinite Mindset Definitions

**Infinite mindset.** An Infinite Mindset is a leader's desire to inspire their organization to continually learn and grow to achieve profound results that extend into the future without limits. A leader with an infinite mindset follows five essential practices: advance a Just Cause, build Trusting Teams, study their Worthy Rivals, prepare for Existential Flexibility, and demonstrate the Courage to Lead (Carse, 1986; Dweck, 2007; Sinek, 2019).

**Just cause.** A Just Cause is a vision of an idealized, aspirational future, something bigger than ourselves and the organization. It connects to and reflects the values, emotions, and a sense of purpose of the followers, motivating them to make sacrifices to achieve it. (Carse, 1986; Finnigan & Stewart, 2009; Mascareno et al., 2019; Noghiu, 2020; Sinek, 2019).

**Trusting teams.** A trusting team is a unit where individuals work together to know each other at a deep level and care about and value one another, while creating a high performing team environment that includes active listening, vulnerability, integrity, and personal accountability within the team in a psychologically safe space (Fehr, 2018; Lencioni, 2006; Sinek, 2019).

**Worthy rivals.** Worthy Rivals are successful industry leaders who perform as well as or better than a leader or their organization. Leaders or organizations are inspired to study these players and improve based on the strengths and abilities identified in them (Millennial Executive, 2021; Sinek, 2019).

**Existential flexibility.** Existential flexibility is a leader's ability to anticipate changing conditions and initiate a potentially risky strategic disruption to set the organization on a new path necessary to achieve the idealized future (Avolio, 2005; Dhiman, 2011; Goleman, 1995; Owen, 2015; Sinek, 2019).

**Courage to lead.** The Courage to Lead is a leader's ability to stand up against/to pressures or norms that do not align with organizational or individual goals and values and is characterized by the willingness to take risks for sustained success in an unknown, idealized future (Lassiter, 2021; Sinek, 2019).

### **General Definitions**

**Extraordinary results.** Extraordinary results are those accomplishments that are remarkable, surprising, exceptional and go beyond what is usually expected (O'Reilly & Pfeffer, 2000).

**Expert.** An expert for a particular field of study is an individual within a company or organization who possesses knowledge, skill, education, and experience with the capability to identify strengths in skills and other individuals (Patton, 2018).

**Student affairs leaders.** For the purposes of this study, a student affairs leader serves in a management role overseeing more than one student support or co-curricular program with decision-making responsibilities at an institutional-level (Harper, 2004; Lindsay, 2014; Sandeen, 1991). Some of the titles used by these leaders are different

designations of directors, vice presidents, and deans depending on the institution. For this study, the researcher will study student affairs leaders at four-year, traditional institutions of higher education, generally catering to an 18 to 22-year-old student population.

### **Delimitations**

This study was delimited to 12 exemplary student affairs leaders at large, public and private, four-year institutions of higher education in Los Angeles County, California. An exemplary student affairs leader in this study is a leader who demonstrates extraordinary results and evidence of leading their organization to continually learn and grow to achieve profound results that extend into the future without limits, with a minimum of five years of experience in the profession and meeting at least three of the following criteria:

- The exemplary student affairs leader demonstrates evidence of collaboratively leading an organization fostering creativity and future-orientation improvements.
- The exemplary student affairs leader actively participates in community leadership and shared problem-solving activities.
- The exemplary student affairs leader has had articles, papers, or materials written, published, or presented at conferences or association meetings on leadership.
- The exemplary student affairs leader has received recognition by his or her peers as a leader.
- The exemplary student affairs leader is a member in good standing in professional associations in his or her field.

## **Organization of the Study**

Chapter I presented the background and purpose for this dissertation, which investigated student affairs leaders at institutions of higher education in Los Angeles County, California leading with an infinite mindset to produce extraordinary results. Chapter II presents a review of the literature, the theoretical background, theoretical foundations, and the leadership experiences and practices of student affairs leaders embodying the infinite mindset. Chapter III outlines the methodology of the study, which describes the research questions, population, instrumentation, data collection, and data analysis. Chapter IV presents the major findings of the study, implications for action, and recommendations for further research. Finally, Chapter V examines the conclusion, implications, and recommendations based on the data obtained during the study.

## CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

### **Overview**

Chapter II provides a comprehensive review of the literature including the theories and contexts associated with exemplary student affairs leaders who embody the practices of the infinite mindset. The review of the literature is organized into four sections prefaced by an introduction: the infinite game, theoretical foundations, the theoretical framework, and an overview of the student affairs profession. Each section is linked to the concept of the infinite game. The chapter concludes with a summary of the theories, framework, and historical context of student affairs.

### **Introduction**

Leadership can be studied through individual actions and behaviors or through results and outputs (Burns, 1978; Rauch & Behling, 1984). Student affairs leaders face the challenges of leading their organizations through diverse student needs, changes in higher education policies, and financial and political pressures from their respective institutions (Harper, 2004; Long, 2012). The experiences and behaviors of these student affairs leaders can be studied through a set of leadership models and theories. This study focuses on the Infinite Mindset and how leaders play finite and infinite games, by understanding the leaders' desire to win or sustain, respectively (Carse, 1986).

### **Infinite Game**

James Carse (1986) developed an orientation of how individuals can perceive situation, relationships, and environments. A game is played between two individuals or players and can be categorized as a finite game to win or as an infinite game to continue playing (Carse, 1986). How the individual perceives the game that they are playing

contributes towards how they would take action or behave in the range of experiences they have in the workplace or organization. The leader who perceives their game as a finite one finds success in an outcome or result for their organization, while the leader who perceives their game as an infinite one finds success in playing the game and continuing to do so (Carse, 1986; Sinek, 2019).

The finite game is bound to the labels of winners and losers and a culmination of rules and objectives (Carse, 1986). There are defined boundaries within which the players or leaders can play and there is a defined outcome or result that they are playing towards. According to Sinek (2019), leaders have the intention of coming out on top of the game or industry that they are playing in. Carse (1986) went on to conclude that the finite game has a beginning, a middle, and an end. Players and leaders in the finite game can come off as short-sighted in times when celebrating and striving for short-term successes can lead to the downfall of the organization as a whole (Harre et al., 2017; Sinek, 2019).

The infinite game consists of internalized rules and undefined boundaries, where players are left to self-regulate their actions and behaviors within the situations, relationships, and environments they come across (Carse, 1986). Sinek (2019) considers education as an infinite game, where there cannot be a defined winner or loser. While there are laws and statutes that may govern how schools and academia operate, the movement or journey towards an education is mostly an autonomous process. The stepping stones or key checkpoints within education can be considered a finite game within the grand infinite game of the pursuit of education and knowledge. For example, striving for a high rate of matriculation into institutions of higher education may be considered a finite game within the grand infinite game of the journey to develop lifelong



learners in academia. Individuals can capitalize on experiences playing finite games in order to be better equipped with skills and knowledge that they could use within the infinite game (Carse, 1986).

### **Theoretical Foundations**

In order to understand how leaders play the infinite game, the researcher aims to provide a review of the literature with leadership and developmental theories and histories of the student affairs profession and trends in higher education. The theoretical foundations consist of transformational leadership, servant leadership, authentic leadership, path-goal theory, and growth mindset. These foundations support this study's focus on how leaders utilize an infinite mindset.

### **Transformational Leadership**

Transformational leadership is rooted in the relationships between leaders and their followers (Burns, 1978). These relationships create meaningful connections and opportunities for sharing goals and visions in a way that advances the organization by providing an environment where leaders and followers are challenged and supported (Avolio & Bass, 2002; Bass, 1985; Burns, 1978). An element of trust needs to be built between members of the organization, which allows the leader to focus on the relationships they have with their followers and the relationships followers have with one another (Anderson, 2015; Bass, 1985). The transformational leader takes into consideration the needs of their followers and of the organization as a whole over their self-interests by considering the four components of transformational leadership: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Avolio & Bass, 2002). These four practices guide the transformational

leader towards an understanding of the followers and the overall team needs for organizational success.

Idealized influence refers to the leader as a role model in which followers embrace the leader's ideals and morals by way of a developing level of trust and commitment over time (Avolio & Bass, 2002; Bass & Riggio, 2006). This trust is established by the leader's desire to care for their followers and the organization that they lead. The idealized influence facilitates the followers' feelings of respect for and desire to emulate the leader in their day-to-day tasks (Avolio & Bass, 2002; Bass & Riggio, 2006; Cherry, 2022).

Inspirational motivation refers to the shared, clear vision for the organization between the leader and their followers stemming from individual commitment to and passion for the organization (Avolio & Bass, 2002; Cherry, 2022). Not only will followers be committed to their leader, but the transformational leader will remain committed to the organization's goals and overall mission. The shared commitment to a singular vision is crucial to inspirational motivation as it leads to the shared feeling of fulfillment for the leader and their followers (Avolio & Bass, 2002; Bass & Riggio, 2006).

Intellectual stimulation is focused on the leader's encouragement for followers' creativity and innovation (Cherry, 2022). By encouraging exploration of individuals' opinions and ideas about organizational processes that can be changed or issues that need to be addressed, the leader is holding a space where followers feel comfortable to take risks and take initiative. A transformational leader utilizes intellectual stimulation to open

opportunities for decision-making at the organizational level (Avolio & Bass, 2002; Bass & Riggio, 2006).

Lastly, individualized consideration centers the transformational leader's perspective upon the followers themselves (Avolio & Bass, 2002). This one-on-one relationship between the leader and each individual follower takes into account the levels of trust and commitment that the leader has to the follower. The transformational leader is able to remember and be aware of each of their followers in the interactions that they have, by understanding their unique experiences, needs, and desires (Albritton, 1998; Avolio & Bass, 2002; Cherry, 2022).

By tending to the four components of transformational leadership, the leader focuses on meaningful human relationships. Above all else, the transformational leader prioritizes the needs of the organization and their followers (Avolio & Bass, 2002). The transformational leader's commitment to the individual follower's needs and desires serves the purpose of showing the leader's care for the follower, but also continues the organization's development towards change and success (Avolio & Bass, 2002; Bass & Riggio, 2006).

### **Servant Leadership**

Similar to the transformational leader, the servant leader focuses on the needs and desires of their followers or employees, by serving as a servant to others (van Dierendonck & Patterson, 2015). Robert Greenleaf (1970) coined the term servant leadership as to describe a leader who was service-oriented and had a vision of addressing the needs of others over their own. The servant leader is characterized by their empathy and awareness for those they lead and their embodiment of the servant role more

than the acts of service that they do (Greenleaf, 1970; Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002).

Greenleaf (1970) goes on to define the servant leader as having the natural desire and feeling to serve and to aspire to lead.

Servant leadership takes on a more focused approach than transformational leadership towards followers by relinquishing the leader's self-interest and personal responsibility to the organization by specifically focusing on individual followers, further developing the leader's need and desire to serve (Liden et al., 2008; Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002). By having a vested interest in the follower and understanding them personally and individually, the servant leader is able to uncover their potential (Liden et al., 2014). Stemming from Greenleaf's original work, servant leadership has been developed into a set of four tenets of effective servant leaders, which include sharing the power in decision-making, having a holistic approach to work, promoting a sense of community, and being of service to others (Frick & Spears, 1996).

By sharing power in decision-making situations and processes, leaders develop a level of trust and encouragement with their followers (Frick & Spears, 1996). The importance of shared decision-making in servant leadership is centered on the potential alignment of leaders and followers' shared needs and desires, which can permeate into organizational success (Malphurs, 1996; Russell, 2001). By uncovering what the followers' needs and desires are, the servant leader can tap into potential connections that would build trust and loyalty between themselves and their followers (March, 1994).

In order to take a holistic approach to their work, the servant leader fosters an environment where individual followers and members of the organization are comfortable to share their thoughts and opinions (Frick & Spears, 1996). Russell (2001)

indicates that individual values are important to the success of servant leadership. These values play a key role within the interpersonal relationships members of the organizations have with one another and the perceptions each member has of the organization as a whole (Burns, 1978; Russell, 2001).

Promoting a sense of community among followers allows for organizational alignment in a way that the followers are able to personally resonate with the organization's vision and goals (Frick & Spears, 1996). Creating this community depends upon the servant leader's day-to-day actions and behaviors that could build up or detract from the followers' perceptions of the sense of community (De Pree, 1997; Fairholm, 1997). One of these behaviors is being of service to others. The servant leader's natural desire to serve and commitment to others leads into their decision to become the leader over others (Frick & Spears, 1996; Keith, 2015). Wilkes (1996) notes that the servant leader gives up their personal benefit to find a greater cause or success in service to others.

### **Authentic Leadership**

Authentic leadership finds its core in trust and transparency within the literature of positive organizational behavior (Avolio et al., 2004). The authentic leader draws from a great level of self-awareness and a process of self-actualization of their own experiences in a way that aligns with themselves authentically (Avolio & Luthans, 2006; Gardner et al., 2005; Walumbwa et al, 2008). Some of the behaviors exhibited by the authentic leader are: bringing individuals together with a shared vision and purpose, empowering others to participate and engage, and leading with authenticity to create a values-based approach (George, 2007).

Embodying authenticity and embracing shared commitments with their followers within the organization, the authentic leader also instills their values and ethics into all aspects of their lives beyond the organization (Erickson, 1995). Through staying authentic, these leaders inspire and empower those that they lead. In order to maintain authenticity, the leader must be self-aware and self-regulate their actions and behaviors that represent themselves within the public perception of their followers (Walumbwa et al., 2008). A leader's self-awareness is connected to their understanding of who they are and how they lead others (Brown, 2018). The time and energy that the leader takes to consider these perceptions could reveal the extent to which they are committed to their followers and the organization they lead.

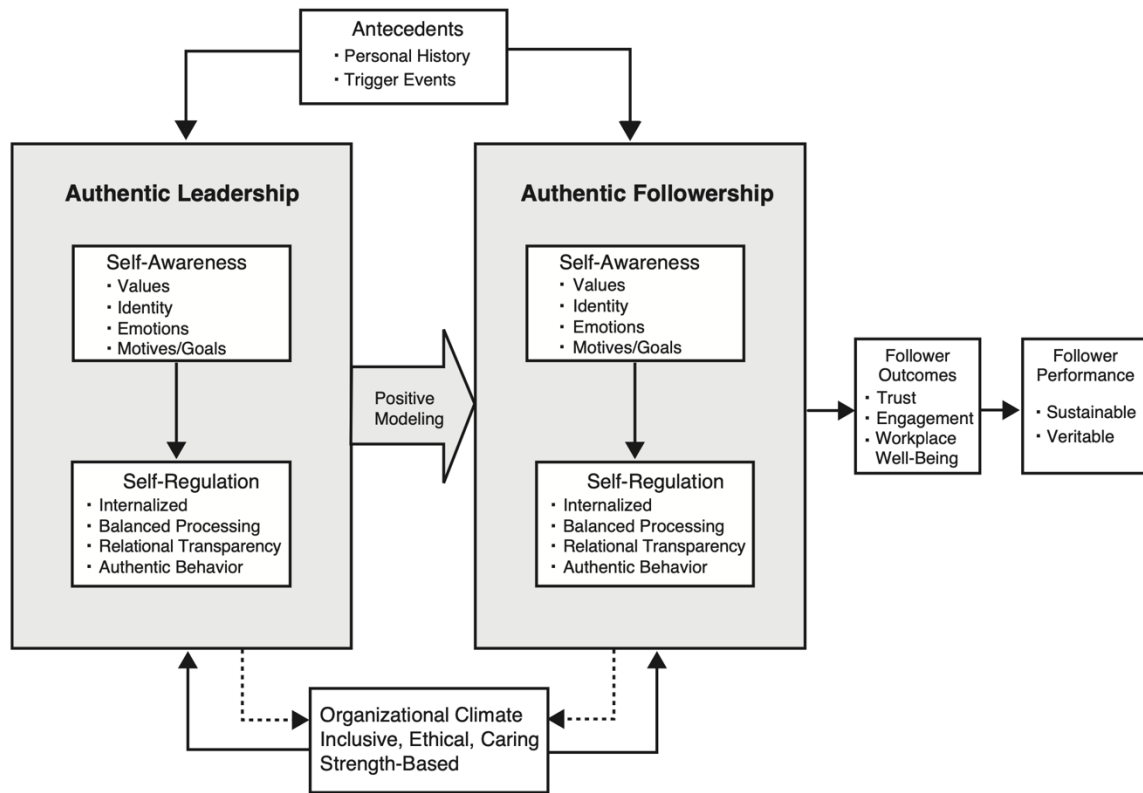
The authentic leader, similar to the servant leader, develops trust with their followers. While the follower's trust in a leader can develop from acts of service within the scope of servant leadership, the authentic leader has developed a relationship with their followers that has revealed their own selflessness for a certain cause or moral and shared commitment through aligned values and ideals (Cavazotte et al., 2021). Additionally, the authentic leader takes the time and energy to ensure that they are understanding how their actions and behaviors are being perceived and received by their followers, revealing another way they these leaders show care and commitment for those they lead (Avolio et al., 2004; Walumbwa et al., 2008).

Leaders and followers within the scope of authentic leadership undergo a leadership development process that takes self-awareness and self-regulation into consideration, as the authentic leader plays a role in positive modeling for their followers (Gardner et al., 2005). These followers then model their own practices of being authentic

as an individual from the authentic leader. By understanding their authenticity, members of the organization become empowered to present their personal values and morals in the organization or workplace. Figure 1 illustrates the authentic leadership development process that captures how the authentic leader models self-awareness and self-regulation for their followers, which further allows these followers to become authentic in their own way (Gardener et al., 2005).

**Figure 1**

*Conceptual Framework for Authentic Leader and Follower Development*



*Note.* This diagram shows the process of authentic leadership development between leaders and their followers. From ““Can You See the Real Me?” A Self-Based Model of Authentic Leader and Follower Development,” by W. L. Gardner, B. J. Avolio, F. Luthans, D. R. May, and F. Walumbwa, 2005, *The Leadership Quarterly*, 16(3), p. 346.

## **Happenstance Learning Theory**

The situations and scenarios that followers find themselves in may contribute to the opportunities to learn from the leaders that they look up to. Krumboltz (2009) developed the happenstance learning theory, where individuals derive learning opportunities from the planned and unplanned experiences that they come across. The leader has the power and ability to influence followers' experiences and well-being through their actions and behaviors (Krumboltz, 2009). Issues and concerns that come up within the organization may develop into random and unintended events and experiences for a range of the members of the organization (Lee et al., 2017). Krumboltz (2009) then extends this learning theory by explaining that having unpredictable consequences leads to learned behaviors to address such unprecedented experiences.

In these unprecedented experiences, the individual relies on what they know to be actions and behaviors that they know they are capable of and reveal their authentic self (Fusco et al., 2015). Through proven success and positive reception of putting forth their authentic selves to address those unplanned experiences, leaders and followers develop trust for one another through their comfortability in revealing their authentic selves in the workplace (Fusco et al., 2015; Magnuson et al., 2003). With an organization consisting of members being their authentic selves, the organization can continue to develop a collection of learned behaviors and shared values to bring forth organizational success and growth (Magnuson et al., 2003).

Krumboltz (2009) noted that learning opportunities affect various areas of work behaviors like knowledge, interest, and skills. As followers continue to learn from their leaders and gather learned behaviors in the workplace, they begin to develop their own



values and morals as potential leaders (Fusco et al., 2015; Krumboltz, 2009). These values and morals then become the basis for how individuals find alignment in the work they do and their organizations.

### **Path-Goal Theory**

After finding the values and morals that the organization and its members center around, the leader is tasked with the responsibility of bringing about actions and commands that could meet a specific goal or mission of the collective whole. House's (1971) path-goal theory focuses on attributes and characteristics of leadership and followership as it relates to specific goals or outcomes. The theory goes on to conclude that leadership actions and behaviors affect followers' and employees' motivation, performance, and satisfaction with the organization as a whole (House, 1971). These actions and behaviors need to match or align with the desired outcome with the followers' needs and desires in mind (Bickle, 2017; Phillips & Phillips, 2016).

House (1971) described how leaders utilize a path-goal approach, which includes guiding followers towards a goal or removing obstacles and barriers on the way to a goal. The leader's awareness of the followers' needs to meet the goal leads to the followers' greater motivation and satisfaction with the organization. Cameron and Pierce (2002) indicated that members of the organization are driven by combinations of extrinsic and intrinsic factors or motivations. The leader's extrinsic motivation comes from the care and compassion they hold for their followers and the shared mission of the organization (Cameron & Pierce, 2002). On the other hand, the leader's intrinsic motivation includes genuine importance or priority they may have placed upon their professional

development and how it could align with what the organization strives for (Cameron & Pierce, 2002).

After taking account of their followers' needs, the leader utilizes the ability to self-regulate actions and behaviors that would best serve their followers and the organization as a whole, which contributes towards the leader's professional development (Saleem et al., 2021). Harnessing the experiences and skills of leading with the followers' needs in mind, the leader is establishing an organizational presence and approach with their own set of beliefs, values, and morals as a leader and as a professional. The leader who takes the path-goal leadership approach continues to consider how to guide an organization through sustained growth and development and how their leadership actions and behaviors fits into and aligns with the organization and its members (Saleem et al., 2021).

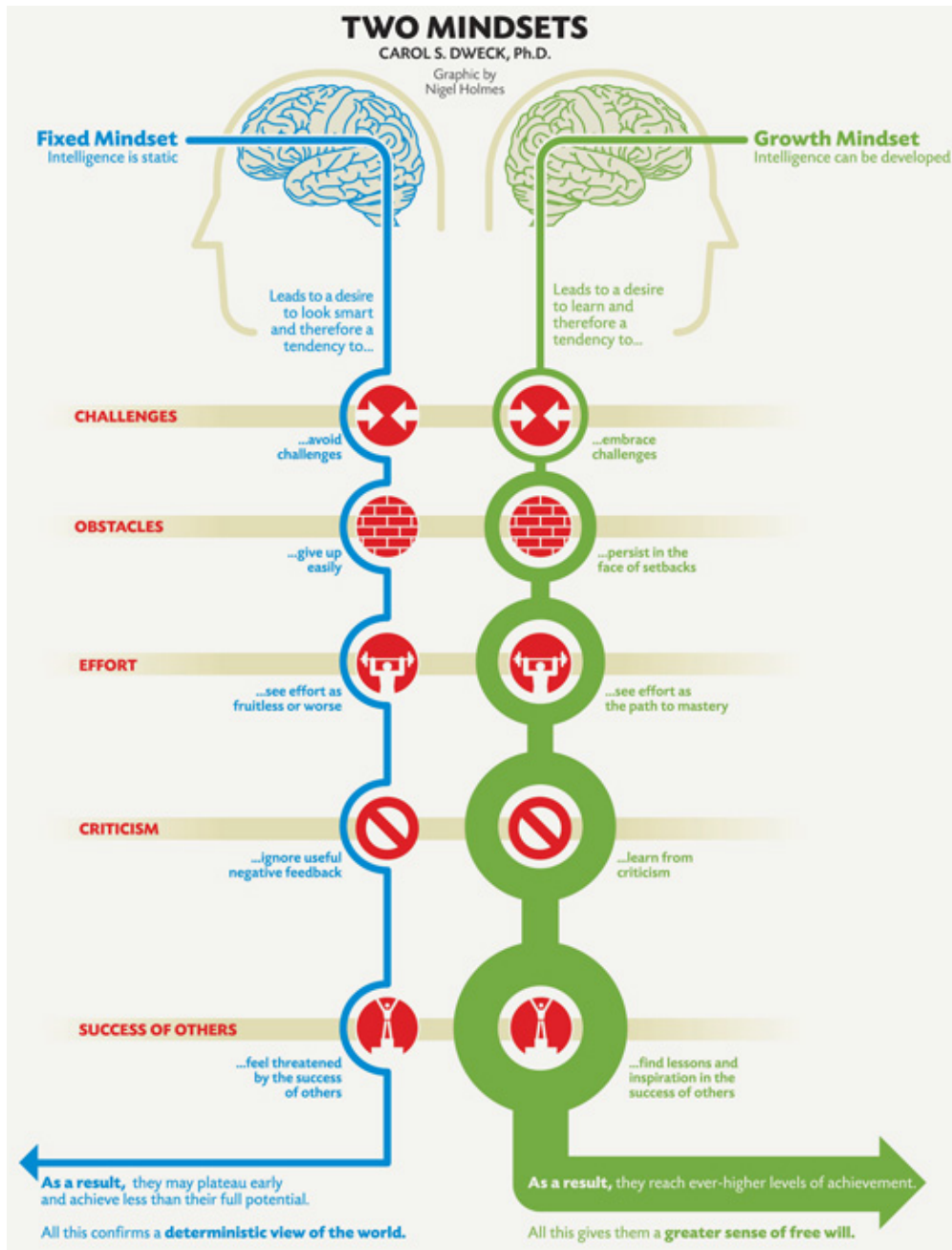
### **Growth Mindset**

With the followers' needs and desires in mind, the leader also needs to consider how their own ideas and beliefs play into their understanding of their role as a leader. Dweck (2006) developed the growth mindset to describe how individuals understand how they perceive themselves and how to find success within that perception. The growth mindset focuses on the individual's perception of experiences as opportunities rather than as challenges. With a growth mindset, barriers and obstacles are perceived as opportunities for growth and development (Dweck, 2007). This indicates a perspective shift of something that has negative connotations into a positive element for the individual.

Dweck (2006) also described the fixed mindset, where individuals feel stagnant or believe that intelligence or knowledge is static. The leader with a fixed mindset may avoid challenging or risky situations, with the fear of failing or having negative or detrimental results. Rather than avoiding challenging or risky situations, the growth minded individual embraces them as learning opportunities and takes steps towards meeting their full potential (Rosenberger, 2017). Figure 2 illustrates the differences between the fixed and growth mindsets as they are internalized and what results come out of each perspective.

**Figure 2**

*Two Mindsets*



*Note.* This diagram shows the differences between the fixed mindset and the growth mindset as it relates to challenges, obstacles, effort, criticism, and success of others. From “Mindset: The New Psychology of Success” by C. S. Dweck, 2006.

The five elements considered in the comparison between the fixed and growth mindsets included the individuals' perceptions on challenges, obstacles, effort, criticism, and success of others (Dweck, 2006). As challenges or obstacles come up, the growth minded individual embraces them as opportunities to grow and develop (Dweck, 2006; Oxendine, 2014). The fixed minded individual would avoid these challenges or obstacle or be deterred from continuing to pursue or work towards a resolution or goal within the organization.

Dweck (2006) then described effort as the "path to mastery" (p. 245). This draws from the individual's motivation to continue to learn and develop towards mastery of some skill or attribute. Understanding the amount of effort that the leader puts into their leadership actions and behaviors reveals the leader's commitment towards their own development and to their followers, especially in how to effectively lead an organization through challenges and anticipating what followers may need or desire (Oxendine, 2014; Rosenberg, 2017). Lastly, the growth minded individual considers criticism and the success of others as learning opportunities and potential gaps in skills and abilities that they could seek more experiences for in the future (Dweck, 2006). Ultimately, the individual needs to consider and learn about how their own behaviors and practices as a leader can best be utilized for and aligned to the organization and its members.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Simon Sinek (2019) developed a framework through which leaders embody a set of five practices making up the infinite mindset, where leaders serve as players within the infinite game. The leader who utilizes the infinite mindset advances a just cause, builds trusting teams, studies a worthy rival, prepares for existential flexibility, and

demonstrates the courage to lead. Sinek's (2019) five practices serve as the theoretical framework that was used to study exemplary student affairs leaders at institutions of higher education.

### **Just Cause**

The leader who advances the just cause is one who actively works towards a common or shared mission or vision of the collective organization (Sinek, 2019). This shared mission or vision aligns with individuals' values and morals in a way that members of the organization feel fulfillment from working towards the same idealized goal and makes up something larger than the individuals and the organization (Carse, 1986; Noghiu, 2020; Sinek, 2019). Members of an organization who fail to have a shared vision tend to be thoughtless and reactive to challenges and issues (Covey & Gullledge, 1994). A shared mission or vision that rises above the organization and the leader and their followers connects to individuals' values and morals in a way that evokes emotions (Mascareno et al., 2019; Noghiu, 2020). The cause or mission that resonates with individuals on an emotional level encourages them to be more committed to the organization or leader.

Sinek (2019) stated that the just cause is for something, inclusive, service oriented, resilient, and idealistic. These elements contribute towards how individuals feel connected and committed to the leader or the organization. For example, followers may feel greater commitment towards the organization if the primary beneficiaries of the cause or mission lie externally to members of the organization. Sinek (2019) described this as a service oriented, just cause. Aside from purely monetary motivation, the individual may feel committed to providing service or social good to others. Pink (2009)

argued that employees can feel greater satisfaction within the organization if there is a purpose or vision beyond financial gain. A member of an organization may feel more satisfaction with the just cause if it results in benefits or services for others.

The leader advances the just cause by considering the followers and the organization they lead, just as servant leadership considers those beyond the self when embodying leadership actions and behaviors (Liden et al., 2008; Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002; Sinek, 2019). As the servant leader considers their followers' personal needs and desires when taking action, the leader who advances the just cause empowers followers to consider the needs and desires of others, beyond the organization. The leader who advances the just cause determines and gathers members of the organization around the shared mission or vision of an idealized future, which could be ethereal or unattainable (Finnigan & Stewart, 2009; Noghiu, 2020; Sinek, 2019). Gathering around the vision of an idealized future, followers may feel inspired by the leader who has established some perspective or orientation that resonates with them. The leader who advances the just cause is transformational, utilizing elements of transformational leadership and idealized influence by connecting to followers to establish trust and commitment (Avolio & Bass, 2002; Bass & Riggio, 2006; Sinek, 2019).

As the leader embodies their authentic self, harnessing elements of authentic leadership by leading the charge with their values and morals, followers begin to explore their authentic selves within the context of the organization (Gardner et al., 2005). This then leads into the alignment of the leader's and their followers' authentic selves by establishing the shared mission or vision of the organization. Sinek (2019) then went on to assert that the just cause, as an idealized future state, is one that an organization can

progress towards, but never fully achieve. This creates the environment within the organization where the leader who is advancing a just cause is committed to sustained progress in the infinite game, rather than playing the finite game to win.

### **Trusting Teams**

Building a trusting team consists of developing a group of individuals where care and compassion for each member is prioritized within an organization (Sinek, 2019).

Teams that lack trust or relationships with trust create an environment where individuals or members of the organization may fear speaking to the group about their opinions and perspectives (Lencioni, 2002). On the other hand, an individual within a trusting team is comfortable being vulnerable with others and feels safe and secure enough to ask for feedback or assistance (Lencioni, 2002). Brené Brown (2018), an authority on the intersection of vulnerability and leadership, revealed that the leader's ability to be vulnerable serves as a strength in establishing relationships and influencing others.

The leader who builds trusting teams values active listening, vulnerability, integrity, and personal accountability (Fehr, 2018; Lencioni, 2006; Sinek, 2019). These elements are developed through shared experiences as a group or through one-on-one interactions. For example, a member of an organization who recognizes these values within their organization and from their leader would be more likely to share their thoughts and opinions amongst other members of their team or directly with the leader. This depends on the leader to demonstrate being vulnerable and practicing skills that develop and build trust (Lencioni, 2006). The leader avoids punishing or reprimanding those who take chances and fail and encourages risk taking and communication (Fehr, 2018; Lencioni, 2006).



Working towards building a trusting team, the leader cultivates an environment where members of the organization are able to reflect and begin to develop an awareness of one another's experiences and needs (Fehr, 2018). This builds upon the reliance of each member of the organization upon one another. This mirroring of becoming vulnerable and developing trust aligns with the authentic leadership development process (Gardner et al., 2005). As followers see their leader being vulnerable and utilizing their personal values and morals within the environment of the organization, they become more likely to be vulnerable and present their personal values and morals themselves. Embracing vulnerability allows the leader to become more effective in influencing others and building relationships with their followers (Brown, 2018).

The reciprocal care of the leader for their followers and the followers for one another establishes the trust in that the leader can depend on the followers and the followers can depend on the leader. This centers on the commitment that all of the organization's members have for one another. Promoting the sense of community amongst members of the organization follows one of the elements of servant leadership (Frick & Spears, 1996). In order to understand how the leader perceives situations and develops a way to address them, the leader relies on learned behaviors that could result in increasing trust and commitment to the organization (Fusco et al., 2015; Krumboltz, 2009). Through time and commitment towards building a trusting team, the leader becomes better equipped to handle situations that could harm or contribute to the progress towards establishing trust within the organization.

## **Worthy Rival**

In line with the leader's ability to be self-aware of how their actions contribute towards the development of trust in teams, the leader is also aware of their own experiences and skills as they compare with a competitor or rival. Sinek (2019) indicated that the infinite minded leader studies a worthy rival in order to increase their awareness of what they lack in comparison to what others do well. The competitor or rival does not serve in a role where the leader feels the need to compete or win, rather they feel inspired or motivated to seek opportunities and chances to learn and grow. Selecting the rival that drives the leader to strive to win creates a finite game, while selecting one that inspires the leader creates an infinite game (Carse, 1986; Sinek, 2019). The worthy rival is a successful industry leader who serves in a role as the basis for inspiration and improvement in a leader's or organization's strengths and abilities (Millennial Executive, 2021; Sinek, 2019).

Leaders and organizations become inspired to study similar or equivalent counterparts in industries in order to understand the reasoning behind why these selected leaders and organizations do the work they do (Millennial Executive, 2021). By understanding how others lead, the infinite minded leader can explore how their authentic self as an authentic leader aligns with how they can take on different leadership actions and behaviors for their own organization. By working on developing their self-awareness, the leader is able to begin self-regulating their actions and behaviors as an authentic leader (Gardener et al., 2005). The leader develops respect for their worthy rival because it allows them to develop a deeper understanding of their motivations and drive for the

work they do, especially if it aligns with the leader's motivations (Millennial Executive, 2021).

The leader who studies their worthy rival understands the landscape and playing field of their infinite game (Carse, 1986; Sinek, 2019). The leader and their worthy rival do not need to be aware that they are in an infinite game, and yet the process of continuous growth and leadership development is, in itself, the infinite game (Carse, 1986). For example, the leader may point out an action or behavior that is deemed positive or successful from their worthy rival and wishes to adapt it into their own leadership approach. On the other hand, the worthy rival could be reciprocating that same sentiment and thought process. The worthy rival stands apart from any other rival or competitor beyond just playing the infinite game; the worthy rival can serve as an ally or partner to the leader's growth and development (Millennial Executive, 2021).

### **Existential Flexibility**

The perceptions of what the leader sees in their worthy rival when they address or tackle new issues and challenges inform the leader on how to handle a range of different situations. Sinek (2019) explained that the leader with an infinite mindset prepares for existential flexibility, which pushes organizations to continuously reexamine and reimagine internal strategies and processes that could drive innovation and creativity. While day-to-day interactions and workplace operations can contribute towards the leader's or the organization's existential flexibility, an organization- or system-wide perspective could offer a greater sense of what members of the organization can do to prepare for existential flexibility. Existential flexibility encompasses the desire to achieve the idealized future through the continuous drive for innovation (Avolio, 2005; Dhiman,

2011; Sinek, 2019). The leader maintains their focus on advancing the just cause through existential flexibility.

With existential flexibility, the leader exhibits the ability and awareness to anticipate potential changes and challenges for their experiences and the experiences of others within the organization (Goleman, 1995). In order to anticipate changes and challenges, the leader needs to be connected to their followers through establishing trust and care. By leading with vulnerability and personal values and morals, the leader builds trust within their organization by leading as an authentic individual (Gardner et al., 2005; Goleman, 1995; Lencioni, 2006).

After understanding one's self and revealing values and morals to others, the infinite minded leader goes on to explore how to address or tackle what comes next. The leader is in the continuous process of understanding how they operate within the context of their organization, with their followers, and with the everchanging goal or outcome (House, 1971; Sinek, 2019). Just as the followers are committed to an organization's mission and vision, the leader feels committed and compelled to take action to support their organization by recognizing potential barriers and obstacles there are along the path between the organization and its goal (Cameron & Pierce, 2002; House, 1971). The infinite minded leader recognizes that this new path to the ever changing goal and the idealized future is potentially risky, but has the experience and knowledge to be able to adapt and maneuver their followers through challenges or pitfalls (Avolio, 2005; Dhiman, 2011; Goleman, 1995; House, 1971; Sinek, 2019).

The leader who prepares their organization for existential flexibility has an inherent disposition for taking risks and accepting challenges. Understanding what

changes or shifts can and should happen within the organization, the leader is not afraid to implement or strategize new ways of thinking and operating. The infinite minded leader embraces existential flexibility with the courage to lead (Sinek, 2019).

### **Courage to Lead**

Leaders are tasked with the responsibility of making decisions on behalf of and for members of the organization they lead. The infinite minded leader has the ability to make decisions and take actions that align with the organization and its members rather than conforming or adapting to external pressures and norms (Lassiter, 2021; Sinek, 2019). Sinek (2019) noted that the infinite minded leader prioritizes the organization and what actions are needed to sustain success over what actions could bring the organization short-term profits. The leader takes their own values and morals, and those of their followers, into consideration when making decisions because they are committed to the vision of an idealized future (Avolio, 2005; Dhiman, 2011; Sinek, 2019).

By succumbing to finite goals and outcomes, the leader may make decisions that benefit the organization in the short-term and are measurable by some level of success (Sinek, 2019). This leader neglects the needs and desires of their followers and defines the success of the organization by profits and bounded or defined growth. On the other hand, the infinite minded leader has the courage to work against these pressures of how success is defined and places priorities upon their followers and the shared values of the organization (Sinek, 2019).

The infinite minded leader considers situations as opportunities for growth and development for themselves, their followers, and their organization as a whole (Dweck, 2006; Sinek, 2019). The courage to move away from succumbing to the pressures of the

finite game enables the infinite minded leader to focus on what areas of growth and development may occur in any given situation presented to their organization.

Rather than to conform to winning the finite game, the leader who embraces the courage to lead considers others in decision-making processes. This leader takes their followers' needs and desires into consideration when making decisions. They are able to recall and be aware of what their followers' and the organization's needs are during those decision-making processes. This reveals the extent to which they are embodying the practices of transformational leadership by showing how much they care for and are committed to the members of their organization and the shared values they possess (Albritton, 1998; Avolio & Bass, 2002; Cherry, 2022; Sinek, 2019).

With the set of practices of Sinek's (2019) infinite mindset, the leader has the capacity to lead an organization and its members through a dynamic environment with external pressures and norms on the path towards an idealized future. The continuous and sustained development of the organization depends on the leaders' and the members' commitments to the shared mission and vision of the idealized future (Avolio, 2005; Dhiman, 2011). Leaders within the field of student affairs at institutions of higher education are called to be committed to their employees and to those students that make up the future of higher education. The academic and co-curricular experiences of the student population make up the idealized future that leaders and members of the organization should be striving for.

## Student Affairs

### Background and History

Smith and Hughey (2006) indicated that studying leaders within the field of student affairs in higher education is a relatively new area of study. As institutions of higher education like colleges and universities were founded, campus presidents and administrators discovered the need for academic and co-curricular support for students (Crookston, 1975; Long, 2012; Randall & Globetti, 1992). The student affairs practitioner served in a role to support students outside of the classroom, but was later expanded to include a variety of student support services that intersected with various personal and social aspects of the student population (Sandeen, 2004).

Long (2012) indicated that the field of student affairs was established in the United States in response to the lack of support that faculty members could provide to students for non-academic matters following World War I. Students began to participate in organizations and leadership opportunities that necessitated oversight and guidance by professionals at the institutions (Long, 2012). Campus administrators and deans tasked with reviewing student conduct and policies were first hired in the field of higher education in the 1920s (Long, 2012). This marked the transition of student support programs from periphery to the priority by creating the expectation that institutions and campus administrators broaden all students' learning experiences (Sandeen, 2004).

The *Student Personnel Point of View*, published in 1937, served as a seminal document for the student affairs profession where the purpose of the profession was explained to support the whole student, in intellect, spirit, and personality as an individual (Long, 2012; Sandeen, 2004). Supporting the whole student continued to be a driving

force in advancing the student affairs profession, by creating initiatives and student support programs that was later connected to the element of collaboration amongst all campus stakeholders, including student affairs professionals, students, and faculty members in the ACPA's 1972 report titled *Student Development in Tomorrow's Higher Education: A Return to the Academy* (Long, 2012). In the developing years of the student affairs profession, new programs and departments were established to better address the growing needs of the student population (Sandeen, 2004).

As the student demographic in higher education began to become more diverse, the field of student affairs began to adapt a global mindset to include a wider range of student-centered services including student engagement and mental health counseling (Long, 2012). In order to adapt to the changing landscape of the American higher education system, the field of student affairs has grown and developed more robust student support programs and departments to better support a more diverse student population. As the definition of the traditional undergraduate student between the ages of 18 and 22 began to change over the years, the student affairs profession began to adapt to the globalization of education, where diverse groups of students advocated for better and more robust learning and engagement environments for themselves and others (Long, 2012; Sandeen, 2004).

Student affairs leaders must adapt their organizations to the needs of students each year. Student affairs divisions and departments across institutions of higher education need to develop practices and processes to meet the needs of their respective organizations and the students on their campuses (Long, 2012; Rozeboom, 2008). The student affairs profession today focuses on how to better orient organizations to their



student populations and how building relationships between the student and academic affairs can best support the whole student (Sandeem, 2004).

### **Student Affairs Leaders Today**

Student affairs leaders are tasked with the responsibility to develop programs and initiatives that meet the needs of students focusing on a variety of aspects like student wellbeing and academic services (Crisp et al., 2020). These leaders are challenged by the pressures of supporting a new student population coming onto campuses each year, with their own sets of academic, co-curricular, and personal needs and desires. Long (2012) stated that the student affairs practitioner navigates the changing needs of student each year in addition to the dynamic nature of institutional culture, technological advancements, and politics.

The field of student affairs has expanded into many functional areas that touch upon different aspects of students' day-to-day lives on a campus (Marshall et al., 2016). For example, student engagement programs have included Greek fraternities and sororities, student governance and leadership, and student organizations as spaces where students can participate and become involved with other students (Marshall et al., 2016; Sandeen, 2004). Other academic and co-curricular programs include residential life for students living on campus, career services for summer and post-graduation transitions, and cultural or identity centers where students can find resources and other students with similar experiences and identities.

The student affairs leader is tasked with the responsibility of making decisions that could impact the student support programs, the student affairs practitioners running the programs, and, ultimately, the students utilizing these programs and services

(Sandeen, 1991). Oftentimes, the student affairs leader needs to consider how trends in higher education and policy changes at their institution will impact their leadership approach in working with their organization of mid- and entry-level student affairs practitioners (Harper, 2004; Long, 2012; Sandeen, 1991). In order to understand how the student affairs leader may be infinite minded, the leader envisions the idealized future of the student affairs organization as the support of all students at their institution.

### **Embodied Practices**

The student affairs leader navigates the ever changing student populations that come onto campuses each year, forcing them to adapt the way they work, lead, and collaborate. Long (2012) argued that the role of the student affairs practitioner is to ensure that stakeholders in higher education are treated equitably and is expected to support or remedy those who experience inequity. This broad scope of the student affairs profession is embodied through the expanse of student support programs and initiatives across institutions of higher education.

In order to understand how the student affairs leader advances the just cause, the idealized future should be considered. Long (2012) indicated that the student affairs practitioner would not have been able to establish and develop robust student support programs without understanding the needs, motivations, and desires of students and other practitioners throughout the field. By understanding students and other practitioners at the individual level, the student affairs leader is able to align program areas or organizations around a common set of values and ideals. For example, a multicultural or identity-based student services office serves the purpose of welcoming and empowering students with common identities, led by professionals or practitioners with similar identities and

ideologies providing experiences and opportunities that they idealize for the student (Komives & Woodard, 2003).

The student affairs leader is leading their followers and student support services to meet the idealized future for the student population: A student population that is treated equitably on campus. This is a shared vision amongst the student affairs leader and their followers that is larger than the organization (Carse, 1986; Noghiu, 2020; Sinek, 2019). By understanding their own values and morals and how they fit into the organization they lead, the student affairs leader is able to lead with authenticity and can create a trusting environment through idealized influence for transformational development (Avolio & Bass, 2002; Bass & Riggio, 2006; Gardner et al., 2005; Sinek, 2019).

In order to build trusting teams, the student affairs leader not only leads with their authentic self, but also embodies vulnerability amongst their followers (Lencioni, 2006). Opening up and allowing their followers to understand and resonate with their values and morals, the leader is able to become more aware of the members that make up their organization. Pope and Reynolds (1997) noted that competencies, such as multicultural awareness and diversity, need to be integrated into the operations and work of organizations to develop more robust and supportive environments for students. Establishing trust amongst members of the organization initiates this process of developing the supportive environment for students, just as leaders can model vulnerability for their followers or employees within their student affairs organization (Long, 2012; Lencioni, 2006). These student affairs leaders are learning new behaviors and actions through chance interactions and involvement with students, faculty, and staff at their respective institutions that bring them closer to establishing trust with their

followers and the students that they strive to support (Fusco et al., 2015; Krumboltz, 2009).

Upon developing their self-awareness and finding their authentic self, the student affairs leader can begin to explore actions and behaviors that their counterparts across different institutions have used to develop their respective organizations (Gardner et al., 2005; Long, 2012). Schroeder (2022) questioned what considerations would need to be taken account of in establishing a new university in 2022, given their perception of the slow-moving change in higher education compared to the rapid developments of the diverse student population. By understanding what currently is a best practice or a critical component for the institution, the student affairs leader can parse out what other leaders have done to develop robust student affairs or student services programs.

Schroeder (2022) noted that the field of higher education is facing the need for a more personalized learning experience for students, which depends upon faculty and staff resources and physical infrastructures to be coordinated in a way that enriches the overall experiences for all stakeholders. The student affairs professional needs to be aware of what processes and leadership actions have benefitted their organization under their purview and then look to others' experiences to feel inspired and motivated to improve and supplement their organization and their followers (Carse, 1986; Millennial Executive, 2021; Sinek, 2019). In order to sustain and maintain the student support programs under the student affairs leader's charge, the infinite minded leader would need to be aware of their own leadership actions and behaviors and those of their counterparts across the field of student affairs.

A growing area of concern for student populations on college and university campuses is safety and security. Knox (2022) reported on the role of media coverage and a campus protest against conservative speaker, Tomi Lahren, at the University of New Mexico. This raises the concern of social media, free speech, and physical safety across institutions of higher education, particularly with political and ideological differences. How the student affairs leader and institutions of higher education handle these situations reveals how well they are prepared for any issues or concerns that arise from day-to-day. Sinek (2019) noted that the infinite minded leader needs to continuously reevaluate the internal strategies and procedures in order to prepare for existential flexibility.

In the example of the University of New Mexico, the student affairs leaders and the university administrators needed to evaluate the competing priorities of allowing students from the conservative organization, Turning Point USA, to express their right to free speech by bringing a speaker to campus, but also allowing and supporting students wishing to peacefully protest the speaking engagement (Knox, 2022). Student affairs leaders work towards the idealized future of supporting all students, preparing to become existentially flexible (Avolio & Bass, 2002; Sinek, 2019). These leaders are working towards the ever changing and oftentimes competing paths to the goal of supporting all students (House, 1971).

The infinite minded leader makes decisions on behalf of themselves, their followers, and the organization as a whole and has the courage to go against the finite goals to play the infinite game (Carse, 1986; Sinek, 2019). Mintz (2022) indicated that students in the transition into and throughout their time in higher education need more specialized or focused support to achieve degree completion and increase post-graduation

earnings. What it takes to complete a degree program or to increase wages and salaries in the workplace following a degree program is everchanging as the needs of various industries change. There is not a single strategy or process that supports all students at all times.

For example, the infinite minded student affairs leader considers what a student's first-year experience is like on campus and how approaches and strategies needed to shift throughout the global COVID-19 pandemic. Mintz (2022) went on to state that a major pillar for student success that leaders should consider is how their institutions are supporting a success-oriented mind-set and developing students' sense of belonging. These same elements are those that the infinite minded leader is striving to bring to their followers and the organization. Just as student affairs leaders are becoming self-aware and start to self-regulate their actions as their authentic selves for their followers; followers are modeling self-awareness and self-regulation throughout their student support programs and services to create robust experiences and spaces for students (Gardner et al., 2005; Long, 2012; Mintz, 2022).

In conjunction with the global COVID-19 pandemic, student affairs leaders are facing concerns about assumptions made about the college experience and how those experiences are supported (Mintz, 2022). Student affairs leaders face the challenge of student affairs and career burnout and stress, whether it is for themselves or for the members of their organization or department. Student affairs professionals transitioning into and out of the field of student affairs across institutions and between the in-person, hybrid, and remote modalities could create issues and concerns for student equity and lack of student support at any given moment (Mintz, 2022). Student affairs practitioners

within the organization and the leaders are working hand-in-hand to meet the idealized future of dynamic and robust student services and programs that support all students across all times.

### **Organizational Commitment**

Successful student services leaders and programs are ones that are consistent and have sustained support for communities of students on college and university campuses. In order to sustain this success, the student affairs leader develops their followers or the student affairs practitioners directly involved with these services and programs. Kuk and Banning (2009) explored student affairs pathways and how practitioners become leaders in the field by taking opportunities to learn how to develop programs with a student-centered approach. These opportunities could be academic through graduate degree programs, professional through workplace experiences working directly with students, and developmental through involvement in professional associations like ACPA and NASPA.

While the entry- or mid-level student affairs practitioner is exploring the field through the engagement and involvement at work and through other means, the student affairs leader is responsible for creating the environment where the practitioners can develop skills and competencies needed for the organization's success and for the practitioners' professional development (Kuk & Banning, 2009; Long, 2012). Student affairs leaders are committed to members of their organization or department, just as they are committed to continue developing themselves within the field of student affairs. These leaders show how they can be servant leaders for their entry- and mid-level student affairs practitioners and the organization as a whole (Liden et al., 2008; Long, 2012;

Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002; Sinek, 2019). These leaders are modeling to their followers how they are committed to their followers, to the organization, and to the idealized future for the support of all students.

### **Summary**

The infinite mindset, as a contemporary model for leadership, builds upon previously developed leadership theories and frameworks. The five practices of Sinek's (2019) infinite mindset have not specifically been studied in the context of student affairs leaders or within higher education. By studying the lived experiences of exemplary student affairs leaders and their relationships with their employees and the student support programs they oversee, the framework of the infinite mindset can be explored set in the field of higher education. The infinite minded student affairs leader may play the infinite game of higher education in order to sustain the development of robust student support services by striving for the idealized future of supporting all students. The view of the literature was organized with a synthesis matrix (Appendix A).



## CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

Chapter III presents the methodology used to conduct this thematic research study. This study used a qualitative research design with a phenomenological approach to study the lived experiences of student affairs leaders and their perceptions on Sinek's (2019) Infinite Mindset and its five practices in creating extraordinary results within their respective organizations. This chapter begins with the study's purpose statement and research questions, before detailing the research design and instrumentation that were developed by peer researchers and faculty members on a thematic team. The team of peer researchers for this study consisted of eight doctoral students who shared a common interest in how exemplary leaders perceive the practice of the five infinite mindset practices. The peer researchers developed a shared interview protocol and criteria for exemplary leadership within their respective target populations. In order to ensure validity and reliability, the study's population, sample, and data collection and analysis processes are presented. This chapter concludes with potential limitations of the study, which could be used as the foundation for future research.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore and describe how exemplary leaders in the field of student affairs perceive the practices of Simon Sinek's Infinite Mindset Framework are embedded within their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results. A further purpose of this study was to understand the organizational supports and barriers these exemplary leaders perceive affect the development of an infinite mindset.

## **Central Research Question**

How do successful leaders perceive the practices of an infinite mindset are embedded within their organization to achieve extraordinary results?

### **Research Sub Questions**

1. How do exemplary student affairs leaders perceive the practice of Advance a Just Cause is embedded within their organization to inspire achievement of extraordinary results?
2. How do exemplary student affairs leaders perceive the practice of Build Trusting Teams is embedded within their organization to inspire achievement of extraordinary results?
3. How do exemplary student affairs leaders perceive the practice of Study Your Worthy Rival is embedded within their organization to inspire achievement of extraordinary results?
4. How do exemplary student affairs leaders perceive the practice of Preparing for Existential Flexibility is embedded within their organization to inspire achievement of extraordinary results?
5. How do exemplary student affairs leaders perceive the practice of Demonstrating the Courage to Lead is embedded within their organization to inspire achievement of extraordinary results?
6. What supports and barriers do exemplary leaders perceive affect the embedding of infinite mindset practices within their organization?

## Research Design

A research design refers to the overarching approach in addressing a study's research purpose and questions that allows the researcher to develop a process to collect and analyze data. The research design can be mixed methods, qualitative, or quantitative. In order to understand how exemplary student affairs leaders perceive and embed the practices of the Infinite Mindset, a qualitative research design was chosen as a best fit this study. A qualitative research design refers to the collection of data that can be interpreted and analyzed using words with an emphasis on interviews, observations, and artifacts (Patten & Newhart, 2018). In contrast, a quantitative research design incorporates the use of surveys and data sets to understand relationships and changes as it relates to numerical data (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). A third research design is the mixed methods approach that incorporates a combination of qualitative and quantitative research designs as form of integrated and systemic understanding of a specific concept or phenomenon (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010).

Exploring lived experiences and perceptions of leaders within organizations requires the researcher to inquire about different aspects of this study's research purpose statement and its subsequent research questions. Utilizing narratives and words collected from a group of individuals, qualitative research aims to culminate themes and findings that align with a study's overarching purpose (Patten & Newhart, 2018). In order to understand how leaders perceive Sinek's (2019) Infinite Mindset and its five practices in creating extraordinary results, the peer researchers determined that the qualitative research design for this study would be further focused in on a phenomenological approach in order to explore the lived experiences and perspectives of exemplary student

affairs leaders. Utilizing the phenomenological approach allows the researcher to understand the lived experiences and perceptions on a given phenomenon, such as achieving extraordinary results through the embedded practices of the Infinite Mindset (Patton, 2015). Other forms of qualitative inquiry include ethnography, grounded theory, and narrative inquiry, which all take on different perspectives and foci to address the study's research purpose (Patton, 2015).

The phenomenological approach focuses on individuals' perceptions of a shared phenomenon and explores the lived experiences of these individuals to better understand how the phenomenon impacts how they construct their realities (Patten & Newhart, 2018; Patton, 2015). Utilizing this approach allowed the researcher to understand the lived experiences of exemplary student affairs leaders and gather insight on their perceptions of how the practices of the Infinite Mindset are embedded into their organizations to produce extraordinary results.

### **Method**

The peer researcher team selected a phenomenological approach because the study focuses on the exploration of lived experiences of groups of individuals with shared characteristics like educational attainment and professional experience. The peer researchers sought to understand a particular phenomenon by exploring these individuals' lived experiences through this phenomenological approach (Patten & Newhart, 2018). The peer researchers developed a semi-structured open-ended interview protocol as the primary method to capture the lived experiences of these groups of individuals. In order to support the responses and findings from these interviews, artifacts were gathered to further explore these lived experiences.

## **Population**

A population is defined as a group of individuals, objects, or events that share a set of criteria or traits that allows researchers to generalize the results of a study (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). For this study, the population includes student affairs leaders at four-year institutions of higher education in California. In the 2020-2021 academic year, California had 737 active institutions of higher education, spanning across both public and private institutions, with only 296 categorized as four-year institutions (UnivStats, n.d.). Pritchard and McChesney (2018) indicated that there are one to seven professionals in student affairs leadership positions from top officers to department heads overseeing more than one program area, which depends on program availability at each campus. Applying this range of student affairs leaders (one to seven) to the 296 four-year institutions yields a range of 296 to 2,072. Due to the limited number of leadership roles at each institution, the population focused on both private and public institutions, as campus climates and challenges oftentimes affect multiple institutions to similar extents particularly with institutions in California (Public Policy Institute of California, 2019).

## **Target Population**

A target population is narrowed and defined so that the researcher can develop more generalizable conclusions (Patten & Newhart, 2018). In order to narrow the population, the researcher focused on student affairs leaders at large, public and private, four-year institutions of higher education in Los Angeles County, California. The five large, public institutions are the University of California, Los Angeles, the California State University, Northridge, the California State University, Los Angeles, the California State University, Long Beach, and the California State Polytechnic University Pomona.

Additionally, the target population includes the following four large, private institutions: the University of Southern California, Loyola Marymount University, Pepperdine University, and the University of La Verne. Expanding from Pritchard and McChesney's (2018) insight where there are approximately one to seven student affairs leaders overseeing multiple program areas, the target population for these nine institutions would be between ten and seventy student affairs leaders.

### **Sample**

A sample is defined as a subgroup of a population that allows the researcher to study a representative group of individuals to explore findings that could be generalized to the larger population (Patten & Newhart, 2018). The researcher used convenience sampling to identify the individuals participating in this study, because it considered the population's accessibility and expedience. Convenience sampling is the method of collecting data and responses from a pool of respondents that is convenient and accessible for the researchers (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). Additionally, the researcher used purposive sampling to ensure that the data that was retrieved for the study consisted of robust lived experiences that could align with the study's purpose statement and research questions (Patton, 2015). Purposive sampling is the selection of individuals for the study that would provide perspectives and insights to the topic given that they meet a set of criteria (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). Additionally, the peer researchers used purposive criterion sampling, which adds a set of predetermined criteria that participants need to meet (Patton, 2015). Utilizing specific criteria by which the participants need to meet allows for a more in-depth analysis of lived experiences

amongst participants with shared characteristics and professional experiences, since the peer researchers are focused on different fields and specializations.

This study focuses on exemplary student affairs leaders using an established criteria created and agreed upon by the thematic team and faculty advisors. For a phenomenological study, Creswell and Creswell (2018) recommend a sample of six to 25 participants. Due to the limited number of leadership roles at each institution, the researcher has identified 12 exemplary student affairs leaders for a representative sample across the ten institutions in this research study as nominated by members of an expert panel.

The team of peer researchers developed a shared list of criteria to identify exemplary leaders for the purposes of this study. An exemplary student affairs leader in this study is a leader who demonstrates extraordinary results and evidence of leading their organization to continually learn and grow to achieve profound results that extend into the future without limits, with a minimum of five years of experience in the profession and meeting at least three of the following criteria:

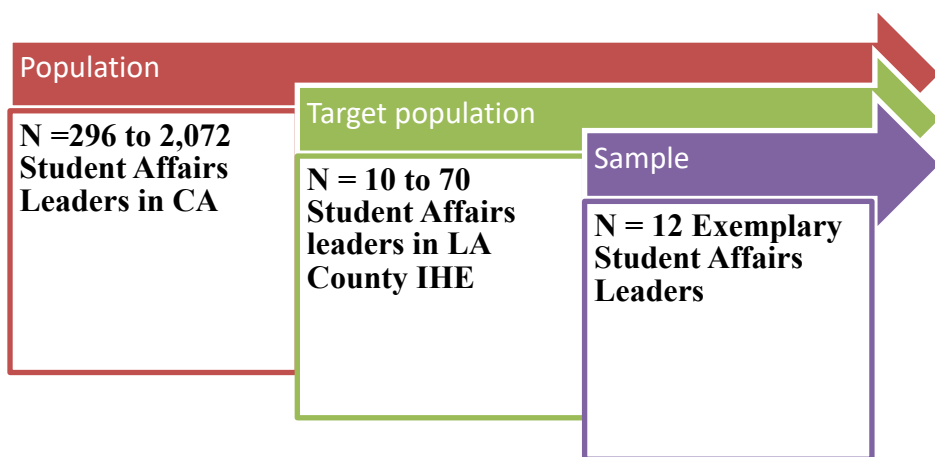
1. The exemplary student affairs leader demonstrates evidence of collaboratively leading an organization fostering creativity and future-orientation improvements.
2. The exemplary student affairs leader actively participates in community leadership and shared problem-solving activities.
3. The exemplary student affairs leader has had articles, papers, or materials written, published, or presented at conferences or association meetings on leadership.
4. The exemplary student affairs leader has received recognition by his or her peers as a leader who gives respect to all people.

5. The exemplary student affairs leader is a member in good standing in professional associations in his or her field.

Figure 2 illustrates the population, sampling frame, and the sample for this qualitative phenomenological study.

### Figure 3

*Population, Sample Frame, and Sample*



*Note.* This graphic shows the narrowing of the selected research population to the sample.

### Sample Selection

The process of sample selection took place after the study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). The researcher enlisted the help of an expert panel to identify exemplary student affairs leaders at institutions of higher education in Los Angeles County, California. An expert panel consists of individuals with extensive experience and insight into a selected career or field of study that would be able to provide suggestions, advice, and participant nominations for a particular study (Patton, 2015; Patton, 2018).



For this study, the expert panel consisted of two student affairs leaders who have an established network of student affairs professionals in the Southern California area and have been with their respective institutions for over ten years. The first expert panel member has a Doctorate of Education from Drexel University and served as an Associate Director for student leadership programs and residential life at a large public university. The second expert panel member has been a leader in the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) and is the Associate Vice Provost for Student Affairs overseeing student engagement and residential life programs at a large private university. These expert panelists assisted the researcher in determining whether or not a student affairs leader met the criteria for this research study.

Each expert panel member was asked to nominate student affairs leaders whom they perceived met the above criteria as an exemplary student affairs leader within the field. The researcher contacted each of the nominees via email and inquired about their interest in participating in the research study and their eligibility to participate in the study by confirming that the criteria was met. The first 12 nominees that expressed interest and confirmed to meet the criteria were selected as participants in the study. No more than three participants will be selected from a single institution to allow for greater variety in perspectives amongst exemplary student affairs leaders from public and private institutions. The distinction between currently roles at a public or private institution was not considered, as participants may have had professional and leadership experiences across both kinds of institutions of varying sizes. The researcher then provided the participants with the following information after the initial agreement:

1. Invitation to participate letter

2. Informed consent form (Appendix B)
3. Research Participant's Bill of Rights (Appendix C)
4. Inquiry about availability to schedule a 60-minute virtual interview

Following the scheduling process for the interviews, the 12 participants were provided with the following information:

1. The researcher provided the purpose of the study and the confirmed time and date for the 60-minute virtual interview.
2. The researcher provided the participant with the list of interview questions and operational definitions pertaining to the Infinite Mindset along with a cumulative infographic of the framework no more than a week prior to the scheduled interview (Appendix D).
3. The researcher informed and confirmed that the participants provided an audible response for verbal consent to the study within the Zoom recording and transcription at the start of the virtual interview.

### **Instrumentation**

The researcher serves as the primary instrument of the study, in the absence of a standardized instrument that would be used widely to study the perceptions of a contemporary framework like the Infinite Mindset. By developing and implementing an interview protocol, the researcher focused on collecting information on the lived experiences of exemplary student affairs leaders through semi-structured, open-ended interview questions on their perceptions of Sinek's (2019) Infinite Mindset and its five practices (just cause, trusting teams, worth rivals, courage to lead, and existential flexibility) as they are embedded into their respective organizations to produce

extraordinary results. These types of interview questions allow the researcher to explore the participant's responses as it pertains to the overarching research study's purpose in understanding how contemporary models like the Infinite Mindset for a specific population (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010).

### **Qualitative Instrumentation**

Developing an interview protocol with a set of interview questions that aligns with the study's overarching research purpose and research questions is one way that a researcher could gather information to contribute to a deeper understanding of a topic or research interest. McMillan and Schumacher (2010) indicate that qualitative instrumentation could include interview protocols, field observations, and artifact collection. Interview instrumentation approaches include the informal conversational interview, the interview guide approach, the standardized open-ended interview, and the closed, fixed-response interview (Patton, 2015).

For this thematic research study on understanding the five embedded practices of Sinek's (2019) Infinite Mindset, the team of peer researchers decided upon the standardized open-ended interview approach with probes that would allow participants to further clarify and explain their responses as it aligns with the study's research purpose and questions. The team of peer researchers worked with faculty members to develop the interview questions through the following steps:

1. Simon Sinek's (2019) five practices of the Infinite Mindset were identified.
2. Each practice and the overarching concept were defined by pairs of peer researchers.
3. Utilizing seminal works, each practice was defined and agreed upon by the peer

researchers through a series of thematic meetings.

4. Common foundational theories and frameworks were selected by the peer researchers to be utilized throughout the research study process in addition to each of the peer researchers' own selected theories and frameworks.
5. In order to align the research purpose, research questions, and operational definitions, pairs of peer researchers with the assistance of a faculty member developed interview questions and probes to be included in the interview protocol.
6. The team of peer researchers and faculty members agreed upon the set of shared interview questions, script, and potential probes to be included in the interview protocol.
7. The interview protocol was then field tested by each peer researcher with a participant within their respective target populations and an interview observer to collect feedback and reflection on the protocol and the peer researcher's interview style.
8. The peer researchers and faculty members adjusted the interview protocol with the feedback and reflections from the field tests. This finalized interview protocol includes 12 interview questions and script that align with the study's research purpose, research questions, and definitions.

### **Artifacts**

Artifacts can be used in a qualitative research design to supplement findings and responses from interviews (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). The artifacts serve as a nonintrusive method of collecting data from participants and organizations that would

align with the study's research design and questions. For this study, the researcher asked participants to provide artifacts like infographics, documents, and emails that illustrate how the five practices of Sinek's (2019) Infinite Mindset are embedded within their respective organizations. McMillan and Schumacher (2010) indicated that utilizing various data collection methods serves the purpose of triangulating data.

### **Field Testing**

Before the interviews were implemented with the selected participants of the study, a field test was conducted by the peer researchers of this thematic study. A field test provides researchers with feedback and suggestions for concerns and biases in the interview questions, the interviewers, and the overall procedures of the interviews (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). Field tests were conducted by each peer researcher of the thematic study with a participant that fits the exemplary criteria of the study and an experienced interviewer to serve as an observer. The observer was selected for their expertise in qualitative research and was asked to provide feedback on a feedback form (Appendix E). The field test participants data was not included as part of the research data; however, they were asked to provide feedback utilizing another feedback form (Appendix F). The last feedback form (Appendix G) was completed by the researcher to provide feedback on the interview process.

Feedback and reflection of the interview protocol and the researcher's interview style and manner were collected and used to adjust the interview process. Adjustments were made to the overall interview protocol to ensure consistency amongst interviews across participants and peer researchers. The researcher used the feedback on interview

style and manner to limit potential researcher bias and to support interview effectiveness in addressing the overall research purpose of the study.

## **Validity and Reliability**

### **Validity**

Patten and Newhart (2018) define validity as the degree to which an instrument accurately measures and collect findings aligned to the research purpose and questions. Qualitative research inquiry oftentimes utilizes credibility in place of validity to define the trustworthiness and effectiveness of a research instrument (Patton, 2015). For this research study, validity was addressed through the collaboration amongst peer researchers and use of multiple methods like interviews and artifacts (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010).

### **Reliability**

Roberts and Hyatt (2018) define reliability as the degree to which instruments for data collection for a given study are standardized or can produce consistent results across different researchers using the same instrument. In order to strengthen a data collection instrument developed for a contemporary framework like Sinek's (2019) Infinite Mindset, the researcher conducted a field test with the interview protocol to produce consistent results.

### ***Internal Reliability***

By working with a team of peer researchers and faculty members, the interview protocol as an instrument was reviewed and adjusted with field test feedback. The field test allowed the thematic research team to assess the interview protocol and the peer researchers' interview styles. The study's internal reliability relies on the instrument's

capacity to produce consistent results (Patten & Newhart, 2018). To further ensure consistency and internal reliability, each interview was allotted for the same amount of time and followed the same interview protocol and script.

### ***External Reliability***

Zohrabi (2013) defines external reliability as the degree to which a study is able to be replicated for future research. For this study, the team of peer researchers collaborated to develop the interview instrument and utilized individual field testing to adjust for a standardized interview protocol. The field testing also provides feedback on how effectively the interview questions collect relevant responses that align with the study's research purpose and questions.

### **Intercoder Reliability**

Intercoder reliability is defined as a measure of agreement and accuracy of which two or more coders identify codes and themes from a set of data (Patten & Newhart, 2018). Because of the phenomenological approach where the researcher is the instrument of the study, increasing intercoder reliability will reduce interference of researcher biases in the analysis of the collected data. Considering intercoder reliability is crucial in qualitative research because it aims to reduce the researcher's biases by ensuring that themes and codes are not derived from personal thoughts and opinions, but rather are collective understandings reliant on the study's findings (Burla et al., 2008; Lombard et al., 2004). For this thematic study, the peer researchers shared the same research purpose, research questions, operational definitions, and exemplary criteria to enhance reliability, validity, and intercoder reliability. 10% of the collected data was reviewed and coded by the researcher and another peer researcher, with the level of agreement set to 80%

(Lombard et al., 2004). Ensuring intercoder reliability is a critical step in producing credible qualitative research.

### **Data Collection**

Qualitative research inquiry uses narratives and words from participants to develop themes and findings that align with a study's research purpose (Patten & Newhart, 2018). Collecting responses directly from participants and from artifacts that they submit contribute to the study's overall data collection methodology. The researcher conducted 12 virtual interviews via Zoom and utilized a shared interview protocol and script developed by a team of peer researchers and faculty members. The interviews were conducted following an approval from the University of Massachusetts Global Institutional Review Board (IRB). Alongside the interviews, the researcher asked for relevant artifacts from the 12 selected participants from the research study. The researcher used the following process to collect data from the research participants:

1. An email was sent to the expert panel members describing the study and the criteria for exemplary leaders to collect participant nominations for the research study.
2. An email was sent to the nominees with an outline of the study and research participant criteria. The nominees were given the option to participate in the research study, given their interest and confirmation of meeting participant criteria.
3. Upon confirmation of their interest and participation in the research study, a 60-minute interview was scheduled to take place on Zoom.
4. Within the week leading up to the scheduled interview time, the participant was



provided with the invitation to participate in the study, an informed consent form (Appendix B), the Research Participant's Bill of Rights (Appendix C), the interview questions, operational definitions, and infographic summarizing the Infinite Mindset (Appendix D), and a digital form to collect demographic information (Appendix E).

5. Prior to the start of the interview, the informed consent form was collected from the participant and a verbal confirmation of consent was included in the Zoom recording and transcript for verification.
6. Following the interview, the recording was transcribed. The transcription was provided to the participants of the study for review and clarification if the participant chose to include more, corrected, or clarifying information.
7. Artifacts were then collected from the participants to support the responses from the interview.
8. The researcher used a naming protocol of Participant 1, Participant 2, and so on to ensure the identity of the participant was held in confidence in all reporting.
9. At the conclusion of collecting the artifacts and the interview procedure, the researcher coded the data using NVivo.
10. All research data from participants including recordings, transcripts, notes, and artifacts were kept in a password protected computer file and were destroyed three years after publication of research.

### **Data Analysis**

The objective of data analysis in qualitative studies is to consolidate and establish common themes from the breadth of data collected from the variety of data collection

methods (Patton, 2015). Following an inductive data analysis process, the data collected in this study was coded and sorted into categories and themes for analysis (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010; Roberts & Hyatt, 2018). The data was collected from 12 exemplary student affairs leaders in the form of interview transcripts and artifacts. Additional information was collected in the form of feedback and clarifications from participants after they reviewed their respective interview transcripts. Using NVivo, the researcher methodologically coded and organized findings from the interview transcripts and artifacts. McMillan and Schumacher (2010) provide a list of five sources where data analysis can begin by extracting categories and themes:

- The research question(s)
- The research instrument [or interview protocol]
- Themes, concepts, and categories used by other researchers
- Prior knowledge of the researcher or personal experience
- The data themselves (p. 369).

While the researcher utilized NVivo, a qualitative coding software, for data analysis, the study relies on the researcher's ability to accurately collect and examine the data. This meant that the researcher needed to conduct an overall scan of the data for an initial interpretation (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010; Sarsfield & Garson, 2018). As the researcher interviewed participants for the study, potential themes and categories were recorded. All of the interview transcripts and collected artifacts were coded using NVivo to effectively organize codes, themes, and categories to allow the researcher to fully analyze the study's data.

Frequency tables for each category or code were developed aligning with the phenomena being studied, revealing potential relationships amongst codes and categories and their resulting subcodes and subcategories (Sarsfield & Garson, 2018). Upon reviewing codes and themes that align with the five practices of Sinek's (2019) Infinite Mindset, frequency counts and quotes for each code and theme were recorded and extracted to validate any relationships between the collected data and the research questions of the study for a better understanding of the phenomenon.

### **Limitations**

Limitations of a study include aspects or elements of the study's research design and orientation that may hinder its effectiveness in producing valid and reliable results and findings (Roberts & Hyatt, 2018). Studies cannot be free of limitations, as they cannot incorporate the breadth and depth of research participants that would capture every unique perspective or experience for a specified population.

### **Sample**

For this study, the sample size was 12 participants for each peer researcher in the thematic team, which would not capture the experiences of all exemplary student affairs leaders in Los Angeles County, California. While it would provide a robust narrative of how exemplary leaders perceive the embedded practices of the Infinite Mindset to have more than 12 participants, the peer researchers determined that the collected data would have met its saturation or redundancy point (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010).

Furthermore, this study focused on institutions with large student populations, which would limit the perspectives on student affairs leadership at smaller institutions where

leaders may oversee multiple departments and functional areas, rather than having the responsibility over a singular functional area.

### **COVID-19**

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, interviews were conducted and artifacts were collected remotely via Zoom and email, respectively. Field observations could not be included into the research design due to the restrictions of in-person activities. Due to the lack of field observations, data analysis could only rely on interview responses and collected artifacts. Furthermore, the participants' responses were influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic as their respective institutions were continuing to transition back into either hybrid or fully in-person operations during the data collection period.

### **Researcher as an Instrument**

Lastly, the researcher as a research instrument was a limitation of this study. The researcher has moved around to different roles at two different institutions of higher education during the research study's development and was cognizant of potential biases. By including peer researchers and faculty members in the development of the research study and instrument, the researcher's potential biases were minimized.

In a phenomenological study, the researcher's lived experience and background serve as a foundation on which the research study's credibility relies on (Patton, 2015). Throughout the development of this research study, the researcher was employed in the field of student affairs in a variety of capacities, moving from residential education to student engagement programs within an academic department. The researcher moved from a middle-management, operations-oriented role into an administrative, program management role. The researcher has a master's degree in Post-Secondary

Administration and Student Affairs and has had experiences in student affairs and engagement programs at four-year public and private institutions in Los Angeles County, California.

### **Summary**

Chapter III detailed the purpose statement and research questions that this study aimed to focus on utilizing the research methodology. Aligning with the purpose statement and research questions, the study was determined to utilize a qualitative research design with a phenomenological approach in order to explore the lived experiences of exemplary student affairs leaders. The peer researchers and faculty members involved with the thematic team developed a research instrument and data collection protocol. The study's data analysis process and methodological limitations were also detailed. Chapter IV provides the study's research findings. Chapter V closes the study with a summary of significant findings, conclusions, and recommendations for future research.

## CHAPTER IV: RESEARCH, DATA COLLECTION, AND FINDINGS

### **Overview**

This phenomenological qualitative study was conducted to explore and describe how exemplary student affairs leaders perceive the practices of Simon Sinek's (2019) infinite mindset framework are embedded within their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results. Chapter IV begins with an overview of the study, including the purpose statement, research questions, methodology, data collection procedures, and sampling protocol. This chapter concludes with a summary and analysis of the collected data as they align with the research questions of the study.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore and describe how exemplary leaders in the field of student affairs perceive the practices of Simon Sinek's (2019) Infinite Mindset Framework are embedded within their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results. A further purpose of this study was to understand the organizational supports and barriers these exemplary leaders perceive affect the development of an infinite mindset.

### **Central Research Question**

How do successful leaders perceive the practices of an infinite mindset are embedded within their organization to achieve extraordinary results?

### **Research Sub Questions**

1. How do exemplary student affairs leaders perceive the practice of Advance a Just Cause is embedded within their organization to inspire achievement of extraordinary results?

2. How do exemplary student affairs leaders perceive the practice of Build Trusting Teams is embedded within their organization to inspire achievement of extraordinary results?
3. How do exemplary student affairs leaders perceive the practice of Study Your Worthy Rival is embedded within their organization to inspire achievement of extraordinary results?
4. How do exemplary student affairs leaders perceive the practice of Preparing for Existential Flexibility is embedded within their organization to inspire achievement of extraordinary results?
5. How do exemplary student affairs leaders perceive the practice of Demonstrating the Courage to Lead is embedded within their organization to inspire achievement of extraordinary results?
6. What supports and barriers do exemplary leaders perceive affect the embedding of infinite mindset practices within their organization?

### **Research Methods and Data Collection Procedures**

A research design refers to the overarching approach in addressing a study's research purpose and questions that allows the researcher to develop a process to collect and analyze data. The research design can be mixed methods, qualitative, or quantitative. In order to understand how exemplary student affairs leaders perceive the practices of the Infinite Mindset are embedded in their organizations, a qualitative research design was chosen as the best fit for this study. A qualitative research design refers to the collection of data that can be interpreted and analyzed using words with an emphasis on interviews, observations, and artifacts (Patten & Newhart, 2018).

Exploring the lived experiences and perceptions of leaders within organizations requires the researcher to inquire about different aspects of the study's research purpose statement and its subsequent research questions. Utilizing narratives and words collected from a group of individuals, qualitative research aims to culminate themes and findings that align with a study's overarching purpose (Patten & Newhart, 2018). In order to understand how leaders perceive how Sinek's (2019) Infinite Mindset and its five practices are embedded in their organization in creating extraordinary results, the peer researchers determined that this study's qualitative research design should adopt a phenomenological approach in order to explore the lived experiences and perspectives of exemplary student affairs leaders. Utilizing the phenomenological approach allows the researcher to understand the lived experiences and perceptions related to a given phenomenon, such as achieving extraordinary results through the embedded practices of the Infinite Mindset (Patton, 2015). Other forms of qualitative inquiry include ethnography, grounded theory, and narrative inquiry, all of which take on different perspectives and foci to address the study's research purpose (Patton, 2015).

The phenomenological approach focuses on individuals' perceptions of a shared phenomenon and explores the lived experiences of these individuals to better understand how the phenomenon influences the way in which they construct their realities (Patten & Newhart, 2018; Patton, 2015). Utilizing this approach allowed the researcher to understand the lived experiences of exemplary student affairs leaders and gather insight into their perceptions of how the practices of the Infinite Mindset are embedded into their organizations to produce extraordinary results.



Qualitative research inquiry uses narratives and words from participants to develop themes and findings that align with a study's research purpose (Patten & Newhart, 2018). Collecting responses directly from participants and from artifacts that they submit contribute to the study's overall data collection methodology. The researcher conducted 12 virtual interviews via Zoom and utilized a shared interview protocol and script developed by a team of peer researchers and faculty members. The interviews were conducted following approval from the University of Massachusetts Global Institutional Review Board (IRB). Alongside the interviews, the researcher asked for relevant artifacts from the 12 selected participants from the research study. The data was collected from 12 exemplary student affairs leaders in the form of interview transcripts and artifacts. Additional information was collected in the form of feedback and clarifications from participants after they reviewed their respective interview transcripts. Using NVivo, the researcher methodologically coded and organized findings from the interview transcripts and artifacts.

### **Population**

A population is defined as a group of individuals, objects, or events that share a set of criteria or traits that allows researchers to generalize the results of a study (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). For this study, the population includes student affairs leaders at four-year institutions of higher education in California. In the 2020-2021 academic year, California had 737 active institutions of higher education, spanning across both public and private institutions, with only 296 categorized as four-year institutions (UnivStats, n.d.). Pritchard and McChesney (2018) indicated that there are typically one to seven professionals in student affairs leadership positions from top officers to

department heads overseeing more than one program area, which depends on program availability at each campus. Applying this range of student affairs leaders (one to seven) to the 296 four-year institutions yields a range of 296 to 2,072. Due to the limited number of leadership roles at each institution, the population focused on both private and public institutions, because campus climates and challenges oftentimes affect multiple institutions to similar extents particularly with institutions in California (Public Policy Institute of California, 2019).

### **Sample**

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characteristics and professional experiences, because the peer researchers work in different fields and have different specializations.

This study focused on exemplary student affairs leaders using established criteria created and agreed upon by the thematic team and faculty advisors. For a phenomenological study, Creswell and Creswell (2018) recommend a sample of six to 25 participants. Due to the limited number of leadership roles at each institution, the researcher identified 12 exemplary student affairs leaders for a representative sample across the nine institutions in this research study as nominated by members of an expert panel.

The team of peer researchers developed a shared list of criteria to identify exemplary leaders for the purposes of this study. An exemplary student affairs leader in this study is a leader who demonstrates extraordinary results and evidence of leading their organization to continually learn and grow to achieve profound results that extend into the future without limits, with a minimum of five years of experience in the profession and meeting at least three of the following criteria:

1. The exemplary student affairs leader demonstrates evidence of collaboratively leading an organization fostering creativity and future-orientation improvements.
2. The exemplary student affairs leader actively participates in community leadership and shared problem-solving activities.
3. The exemplary student affairs leader has had articles, papers, or materials written, published, or presented at conferences or association meetings on leadership.
4. The exemplary student affairs leader has received recognition by his or her peers as a leader who gives respect to all people.

- The exemplary student affairs leader is a member in good standing in professional associations in his or her field.

### Demographic Data

To maintain confidentiality for the participants in this study, they were assigned and named as Participants numbered 1 through 12. Each participant in the study needed to meet the criteria for being an exemplary leader. Table 1 shows how participants met the established criteria for participation in this study in addition to the requirement that they have had a minimum of 5 years of experience in the profession.

**Table 1**

*Exemplary Criteria for Student Affairs Leaders*

Criteria	Participant											
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Demonstrate evidence of collaboratively leading an organization fostering creativity and future orientation improvements.	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
2. Actively participates in community leadership and shared problem-solving activities.	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
3. Has had articles, papers, or materials written, published, or presented at conferences, or association meetings on leadership.		X		X		X				X		
4. Has received recognition from their peers as a leader who gives respect to all people.	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
5. Is a member in good standing in professional associations in his or her field	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X

Participants were asked to self-identify gender, race/ethnicity, years in the profession of higher education, years in their current leadership role, and the highest degree that they completed. The researcher chose to hide the associated institution at which the participants were employed at to protect the confidentiality of the participants. Table 2 shows the demographic data of the participants in this study.

**Table 2**

*Demographic Data of Study Participants*

Study Participant	Gender	Race/Ethnicity	Years in Higher Education	Years in Current Leadership Role	Highest Degree Completed
1	Male	White/Caucasian	13 or more	9-12	Master's
2	Female	White/Caucasian	13 or more	1-4	Doctorate (Ed.D.)
3	Female	White/Caucasian	13 or more	5-8	Master's
4	Female	White/Caucasian	13 or more	13 or more	Doctorate (Ed.D.)
5	Male	African American/Black	13 or more	9-12	Master's
6	Female	Hispanic/Latinx	5-8	1-4	Master's
7	Male	White/Caucasian	13 or more	5-8	Doctorate (Ed.D.)
8	Male	African American/Black	13 or more	1-4	Master's
9	Male	Hispanic/Latinx	13 or more	9-12	Master's, currently enrolled in Doctorate (Ph.D.)
10	Female	White/Caucasian	13 or more	13 or more	Doctorate (Ed.D.)
11	Female	White/Caucasian	9-12	1-4	Master's
12	Male	White/Caucasian	13 or more	1-4	Master's

## Presentation and Analysis of Data

The researcher collected data through semi-structured interviews conducted via Zoom and digital artifacts collected from participants in the study. The data was used to explore and describe how exemplary student affairs leaders perceive the practices of Simon Sinek’s (2019) infinite mindset framework are embedded in their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results. The collected data was organized and coded to find emerging themes among the 12 exemplary student affairs leaders’ responses. A total of 1,479 coded entries were found in the 12 interviews and six unique artifacts. Table 3 shows the overall breakdown of the coded data from this research study in alignment with the different research questions. Figure 4 provides a visual representation of the frequencies of coded entries across the six research questions.

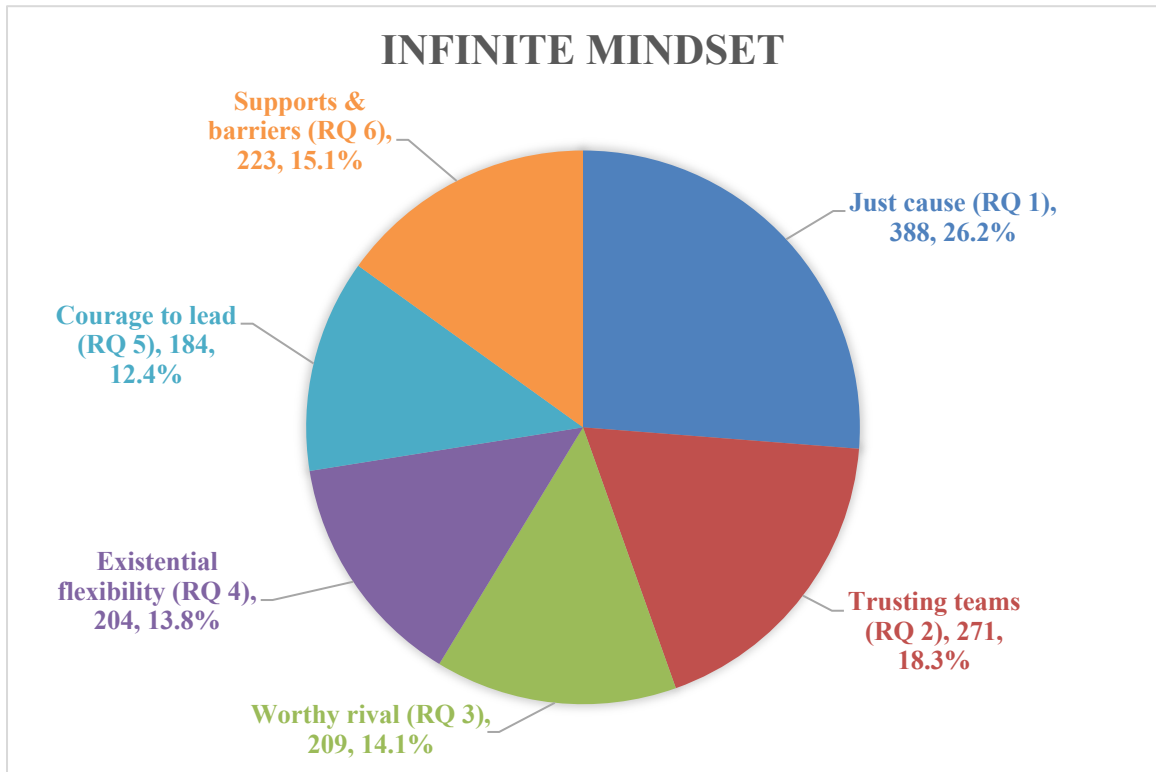
**Table 3**

*Tabulation of Coded Data*

Research Questions	Interviews Coded	Artifacts Coded	Interview Frequency	Artifact Frequency	Total Frequency	Frequency Percentage
RQ 1: Just cause	12	6	346	42	388	26.2
RQ 2: Trusting teams	12	4	240	31	271	18.3
RQ 3: Worthy rival	12	2	184	25	209	14.1
RQ 4: Existential Flexibility	12	5	174	30	204	13.8
RQ 5: Courage to lead	12	4	163	21	184	12.4
RQ 6: Supports and barriers	12	6	189	34	223	15.1

**Figure 4**

*Frequencies and Percentages: Data by Research Question*



**Research Sub Question 1: Advance a Just Cause**

Research Sub Question 1 asked, “How do exemplary student affairs leaders perceive the practice of advance a just cause is embedded in their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results?” For this study, a just cause was defined as a vision of an idealized, aspirational future, something bigger than ourselves and the organization. It connects to and reflects the values, emotions, and a sense of purpose of the followers, motivating them to make sacrifices to achieve it (Carse, 1986; Finnigan & Stewart, 2009; Mascareno et al., 2019; Noghiu, 2020; Sinek, 2019).

Two interview questions were used in the study to collect data from the participants to understand how they perceive the practice of advance a just cause is

embedded in their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results. The first interview question sought to identify how the student affairs leader ensures that the organization's priorities are connected to the organization's vision and aspirations. The second interview question sought to explore how the organization's values and sense of purpose advance the organization's just cause.

The researcher organized the data into three categories that connected to the first research sub question of the study. These three categories or themes included 346 interview frequencies among 12 interviews and 42 artifact frequencies across six artifacts. Table 4 provides an overview of the coded data for advance a just cause broken down by the three themes: mission, vision, and values; student-centered alignment; and top-down and cascading perspective. Figure 5 provides a visual representation of the frequencies of coded entries for advance a just cause: mission, vision, and values; student-centered alignment; and top-down and cascading perspective.

**Table 4**

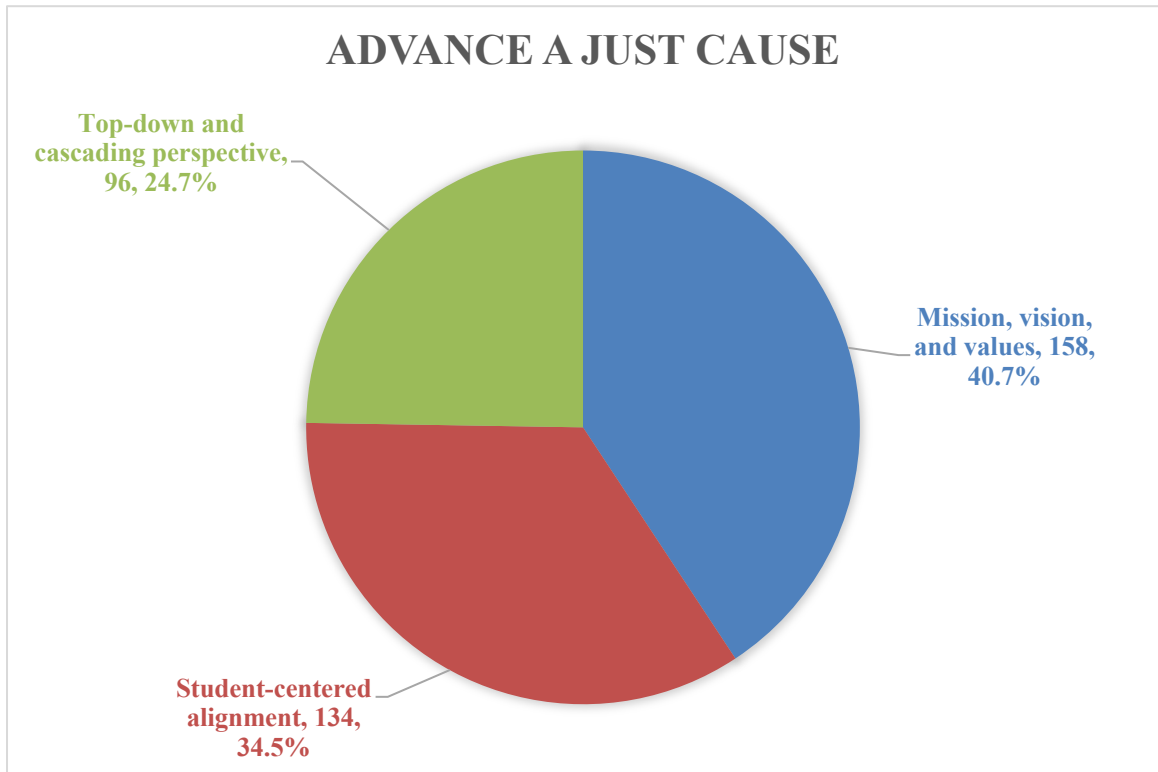
*Overall Coded Entries for Advance a Just Cause*

Themes	Interviews Coded	Artifacts Coded	Interview Frequency	Artifact Frequency	Total Frequency	Frequency Percentage
Mission, Vision, and Values	12	5	134	24	158	40.7
Student-Centered Alignment	12	6	116	18	134	34.5
Top-Down and Cascading Perspective	12	0	96	0	96	24.7



**Figure 5**

*Frequencies and Percentages: Data for Advance a Just Cause*



***Mission, Vision, and Values***

The theme with the highest frequency associated with advance a just cause was mission, vision, and values. The entries for the mission, vision, and values theme included 134 interview frequencies and 24 artifact frequencies, totaling 158 frequencies, accounting for 40.7% of the coded data for this variable. The 158 frequencies represented 10.7% of the overall 1,479 coded entries found by the researcher. All 12 participants in this study described elements associated with this theme. The coded sub themes found within this theme are shown along with their frequencies in Table 5, including physical signage and displays and establishing and developing acronyms.

**Table 5***Theme: Mission, Vision, and Values*

Coded Sub Theme	Interviews Coded	Artifacts Coded	Interview Frequency	Artifact Frequency	Total Frequency	Frequency Percentage
Physical signage and displays	12	1	89	6	95	60.1
Establishing and developing acronyms	12	5	45	18	63	39.9

The responses to the interview questions associated with research sub question 1 centered around how the organization’s mission, vision, and values were advertised, communicated, and displayed for administrators, staff members, and students. These responses highlighted how the student affairs leaders perceived the culture around their staff members and the students at their institution. The following statements from student affairs leaders indicated that their organizations used physical signage and displays to reinforce and communicate the organizations’ missions, visions, and values as they align with the just cause. Participant 1 described the sense of what would be considered the traditional forms of reinforcing organization values in the following statement:

I think really trying to keep [the organization’s values] front and center in traditional ways: fun ways, like in taglines on your email signature. And I know, in my case, as we went from the Zoom world, to the half-Zoom world, to the in-person world, really making it a piece of the framing of what is today’s students on our campus need...When we display [campus values] on the scoreboard, it makes it so we all feel like a part of something larger and more committed to a common vision.

Participant 6 described the process of how new staff within an organization can bring about new perspectives on organization mission and the process of how it should be assessed continually:

So, I got to our campus about a year ago and we had a mission already in place. From what I could perceive, [our team] did not do what our mission was reflecting. I went through this process with our team and developed a new mission statement. It's now something that we have printed; it's in my office, so that when someone comes in, it's very visible. And we try to remind our teams, as we go through assessment, we must always try to reflect upon what our current mission is.

Participant 4 further described how onboarding serves as a critical period for informing new staff members about the organization's mission, vision, and values through clear displays of these elements:

For student affairs, we actually have clear priorities listed. And making sure that it's drilled down into the organization, it has to be shared with new staff coming onboard and reiterated on an ongoing basis...Folks are involved in the reassessment of our priorities, our values, and our mission so that there's continued buy-in and support for it.

These clear displays of values are further reinforced by the use of acronyms that

Participant 1 described as a way to align values among students, staff, and administrators:

When we introduced [campus] values, it was more like an ethical state, but now it's a values alignment. So, I think that the concept of the acronym, RAISE, is what we really try to embrace, no matter what the problem is, what the leadership

activity is, what the staffing service training is. You try to align it to those letters. Respect. Accountability. Integrity. Service. And excellence. I have come to find over time that just making those simple words of value front-and-center is, to me, one of the most effective ways of letting people interpret it.

Organizational vision and purpose in higher education can be conceptualized between campus administrators and leaders and their organizations' staff members. Participant 5 described a process in the form of an acronym for understanding organizational culture to seek out these organizational elements like the vision, purpose, and mission:

How do we create and implement those comprehensive standards [for our staff members]? When it comes to the work, it starts with the culture [of the staff]. I've talked about what I call the CDG, which is check in, do your best, and go team. The check in is just to remind the team and everybody that before they come to work, they have to do a check in and assessment of "how do I feel when it comes to my mental health, my readiness to show up to work?" And if they feel like they are not there, what do they need? Do you need to call in and come in late? Do they need to talk to a therapist? So first, before we come to work, we need to check in. When we are at work, we want to do our best. But how do we remind them of their purpose? It's their why. When we come to work at our best, we do our best. It's our capacity. And finally, the spirit of go team. We have to think about the person that was in front of us, behind us, and on the other side. How do we embody that spirit of the team, so that we can all move together?

The four participants quoted made direct references to the ways mission, vision, and values are communicated, advertised, and reinforced into the culture of the students, staff

members, and administrators of these various institutions. There was consistency among the participants regarding how mission, vision, and values are to be reevaluated with new perspectives coming into the organization and with each new academic year. The artifacts analyzed in connection to the mission, vision, and values theme included institutional brochures communicating campus values to current and incoming students.

***Student-Centered Alignment***

The theme with the second highest frequency associated with advance a just cause was student-centered alignment. The entries for the student-centered alignment theme included 116 interview frequencies and 18 artifact frequencies, totaling 134 frequencies, accounting for 34.5% of the coded data for this variable. The 134 frequencies represented 9.1% of the overall 1,479 coded entries found by the researcher. All 12 participants in this study described elements associated with this theme. All 12, or 100%, of the participants agreed that student needs served as a way their organization found student-centered alignment in their work. The coded sub themes found within this theme are shown along with their frequencies in Table 6, including student needs, obtaining student perspectives, and campus culture.

**Table 6**

*Theme: Student-Centered Alignment*

Coded Sub Theme	Interviews Coded	Artifacts Coded	Interview Frequency	Artifact Frequency	Total Frequency	Frequency Percentage
Student needs	12	2	46	8	54	40.3
Obtaining student perspectives	8	4	37	10	47	35.1
Campus culture	7	0	33	0	33	24.6

The responses to the interview questions associated with research sub question 1 had a core focus on how these organizations had a student-centered approach and alignment for their work and mission, particularly regarding how students influence campus culture and understanding that new students come onto campuses each year. The responses highlighted how student affairs leaders are not only aware of the need to be open to the students at their institution, but also try to seek ways to incorporate their input into institutional processes. Participant 3 described how their assessment process addresses student needs:

We do assessment throughout the year to check in on how what we're doing on a regular basis connects back to [our just cause]. So, for example, in my department, how we train our student leaders; are we training them on certain topics that help connect us back to our objectives for that year, in particular, how are our outcomes connected to our initiatives and our ultimate learning outcomes for our students? We also consider how our daily work connects back. And some of that's through tying in intentionally throughout the year, but we really do think about on a daily basis, ultimately is how are we serving our students? What type of community are we creating? Is it a space where all of our students experience meaningful belonging is that a reflection of our values and our purpose? We want students to be really well resourced and really well supported. So, they can thrive in all aspects of their lives. And we really want them at the end of their time here to have experienced a meaningful community. And, they have a sense of belonging here. So that when they leave, they can take that experience and ultimately recreate it somewhere else for other people.

Participant 7 described the process of obtaining these student perspectives:

I think that strategic planning writ large is really one focused on assessment, as it's really big for us, because we're developing students and we're working in a student activities environment. So, assessment occurs across the organization in a variety of ways. We have someone assigned to assessment; department supervisors are responsible for it. And we also interact with the larger university on assessment strategies. I think the last thing I will mention is that we're also responsive to social events, student advocacy, and things that just pop up that require us to reflect and respond. I would say that organizations like ours are a little bit more nimble and able to shift gears and ensure that we're actually achieving our mission and aligning our congruent vision, mission, values, and outcomes.

Participant 8 further described how these students, as well as the university's faculty and staff, feed into the campus culture:

To strategically develop a plan to get students to graduate in a timely manner and provide them with support, we're making it very clear that we can no longer be an institution where we blame the student or their parents or the school that they've come from. We have to be ready to receive the students. They're here not, they're ours. So it's up to us to take them where they need to go and not blame them for what they may not have, when they come in. So, this is the way that we operate as a standard way of talking and working. Administrators and directors of student success need to come up with a plan. We got to come up with a plan on how we're going to address this every January, right after grades come up and then we

have to set up trainings for faculty. We're just now getting ready to incorporate culturally responsive trainings for our faculty on how to create an inclusive classroom and office hours. It really encapsulates an overall campus culture at the university for the students to embrace.

The four participants quoted directly referenced the impact on and need to include students into the overall just cause of the department and the university overall. There was consistency among the participants regarding how students served as the alignment medium for department and division values and goals. The artifacts analyzed in connection to the student-centered alignment theme included division and institutional strategic plans.

### ***Top-Down and Cascading Perspective***

The theme with the third highest frequency associated with advance a just cause was top-down and cascading perspective. The top-down and cascading perspective is characterized by how actions and decisions made by upper administrative and leadership teams at the institution create a culture upon which individual departments and units can build. The leaders of this study described how leadership creates the culture by which their department perceives what can be done, what they can build upon for their own teams, and what can be created for students to build upon. The entries for the top-down and cascading perspective theme included 96 interview frequencies and 0 artifact frequencies, totaling 96 frequencies, accounting for 24.7% of the coded data for this variable. The 96 frequencies represented 6.5% of the overall 1,479 coded entries found by the researcher. The coded sub themes found within this theme are shown along with



their frequencies in Table 7, including the university strategic plans and staff and administration vision.

**Table 7**

*Theme: Top-Down and Cascading Perspective*

Coded Sub Theme	Interviews Coded	Artifacts Coded	Interview Frequency	Artifact Frequency	Total Frequency	Frequency Percentage
University strategic plans	10	0	58	0	58	60.4
Staff and administration vision	8	0	38	0	38	39.6

The responses to the interview questions associated with research sub question 1 had a core focus on how these organizations had a top-down and cascading perspective regarding how the organizations’ missions are impacted by the universities at large. As the culture of the institution is built around the campus administrators and upper leadership, the individual department or unit teams then build off of this institutional culture to create spaces for their students. The responses highlighted how student affairs leaders are cognizant of the impact of the broader university and its policies and culture on the organizations that they oversee. Participant 2 described how transitions in their organizations have influenced their perspectives on the just cause:

We've gone through enormous transitions in leadership. And there's often a disconnect amongst the staff. What is a priority? And how does it marry up to either the divisional vision and the institution’s? COVID changed the game on a lot of strategic plans. We had a strategic plan for the institution and we had one for the division [of student affairs]. I have a relatively new vice president of

student affairs, and she came in and said, we're not doing the one for the division anymore. And it was a huge relief, right? Because they didn't exactly marry up. She has introduced a new perspective for the division with new vision and priorities. And I can't say that there were so off the mark of what we already do in our profession, like being student-centered. It's been harder to embed [the vision] into units because of transitions in staff. But it is what people are thirsty for.

Participant 9 further described the process of assessment and reflection when it comes to university strategic plans:

I think that sometimes what we tend to do is, we become passive in the process, as the university has developed their strategic vision. And I think sometimes what can happen is we can look at it and say, "Oh, that's nice." And what we should be doing is trying to figure out how we are connected to that vision or how do we contribute to it? What are some things in the strategies that we want to focus on as a part of our own strategic vision, as a unit. I know that this sounds pretty basic, but it's through the annual report process. In theory, what should be happening is we spend some time aligning, creating our strategic plan that connects our work; the work we do to the larger university; we have missions and goals that are essentially in support of these university's missions and goals. Every year, as we're doing the work, we get to see what we're doing, reflect on how that is connected to where the university is going and where we're headed.

Participant 1 then described how staff and administrators are able to take on what the university is calling for into their own work:

I think our approach is kind of this cascading approach. I like to tell colleagues: “where else can you work where there's a grand reopening every year, so that, you always have a chance to start the new year; you always have a chance to reinforce it. And then over the course of the year, when things come up, how do you ground yourself to point to something and make sure we're still on track? Sometimes, I say student affairs work and higher education work is like five year old soccer. Wherever the ball goes, we all move to the ball.

Participant 2 further described the intentionality with which how staff and administrators reinforce the organization’s vision:

We were very intentional about taking it to the division at that level and how we got there; that wasn't just invented out of thin air. From feedback sessions, from external reviews, from NASPA standards, from all of these things leading up to our division, because one of the things that people are thirsty for is communication. So oftentimes, even if we're saying the exact same things over and over, it's what people want. And that's why we put it on the mouse pads. And it's the constant reminder of what they are and what we're working for.

The three participants quoted directly referenced the top-down and cascading perspective of how the university or institution informs what the organizations or departments will then bring into their day-to-day work as values, goals, and missions. There was consistency among the participants regarding how the university creates an overarching mission that individual departments will then use to build programs and initiatives.

## **Research Sub Question 2: Build Trusting Teams**

Research Sub Question 2 asked, “How do exemplary student affairs leaders perceive the practice of build trusting teams is embedded in their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results?” For this study, a trusting team is a unit where individuals work together to know each other at a deep level and care about and value one another, while creating a high performing team environment that includes active listening, vulnerability, integrity, and personal accountability within the team in a psychologically safe space (Fehr, 2018; Lencioni, 2006; Sinek, 2019). Two interview questions were used in the study to collect data from the participants to understand how they perceive the practice of build trusting teams is embedded in their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results. The first interview question sought to explore practices that create a trusting and mutually supportive team environment. The second interview question sought to explore how the organization promotes a psychologically safe space that fosters trust.

The researcher organized the data into three categories that connected to the second research sub question of the study. These three categories or themes included 240 interview frequencies among 12 interviews and 31 artifact frequencies across four artifacts. All 12, or 100%, of the participants spoke to each of the sub themes of this study. Table 8 provides an overview of the coded data for build trusting teams broken down by the three themes: establishing and building relationships; communication; and accessibility of the leader. Figure 6 provides a visual representation of the frequencies of coded entries for build trusting teams: establishing and building relationships and communication.

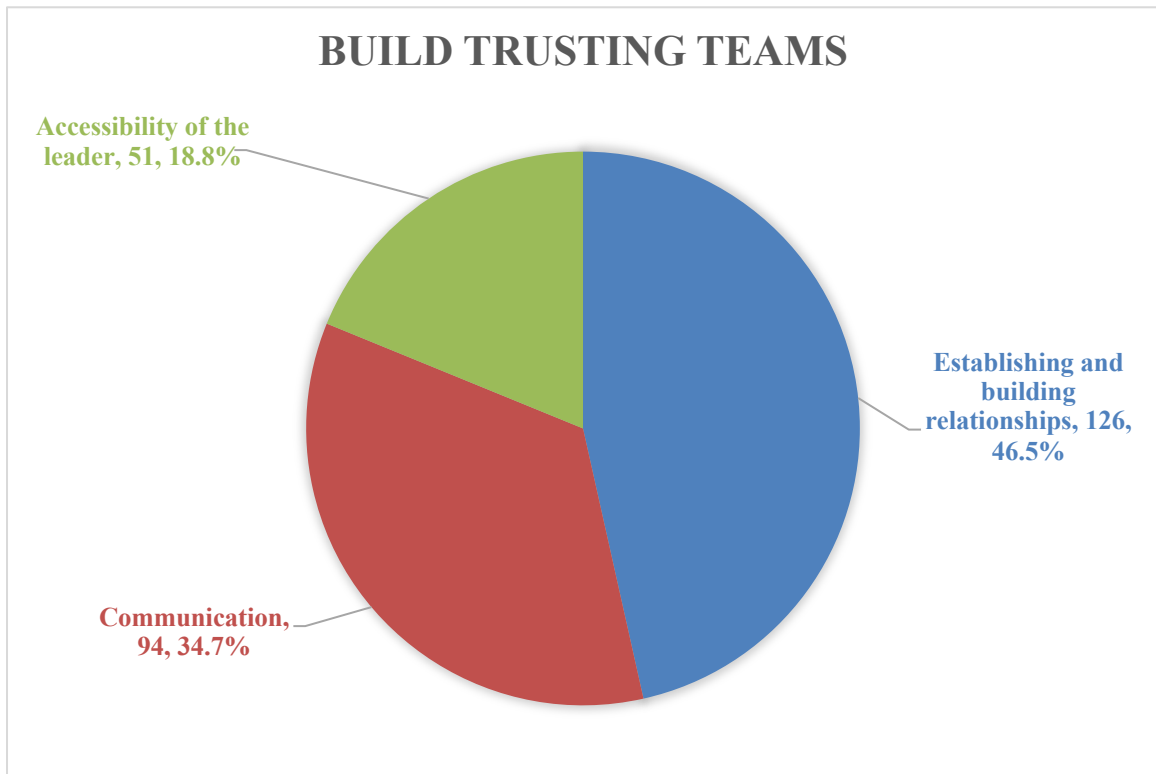
**Table 8**

*Overall Coded Entries for Build Trusting Teams*

Themes	Interviews Coded	Artifacts Coded	Interview Frequency	Artifact Frequency	Total Frequency	Frequency Percentage
Establishing and Building Relationships	12	3	102	24	126	46.5
Communication	12	3	87	7	94	34.7
Accessibility of the Leader	12	0	51	0	51	18.8

**Figure 6**

*Frequencies and Percentages: Data for Build Trusting Teams*



### ***Establishing and Building Relationships***

The theme with the highest frequency associated with build trusting teams was establishing and building relationships. The entries for the establishing and building relationships theme included 102 interview frequencies and 24 artifact frequencies, totaling 126 frequencies, accounting for 46.5% of the coded data for this variable. The 126 frequencies represented 8.5% of the overall 1,479 coded entries found by the researcher. All 12 participants in this study described elements associated with this theme. The coded sub themes found within this theme are shown along with their frequencies in Table 9, including staff needs, intentional staff engagement, and onboarding.

**Table 9**

*Theme: Establishing and Building Relationships*

Coded Sub Theme	Interviews Coded	Artifacts Coded	Interview Frequency	Artifact Frequency	Total Frequency	Frequency Percentage
Staff needs	11	2	47	18	65	51.6
Intentional staff engagement	8	0	38	0	38	30.2
Onboarding	4	1	17	6	23	18.3

Responses to the interview questions associated with research sub question 2 centered around how the leader emphasized the importance of establishing and building relationships. These responses highlighted how student affairs leaders led their organizations by creating spaces for relationships to grow and develop. The following

statements show how these relationships connect with the practice of building trusting teams. Participant 1 described the needs of staff and its impact on relationship building:

Not only did we get through a global health pandemic; we severed relationships for the better part of three years. Whether it's relationships with students or whether it's relationships with our own staff, I saw a headline from a higher ed publication yesterday that [an institution's] student affairs [division] lost 200 staff members since 2020. So, I think this combination of who trusts who. I was on a NASPA call, as the former president NIRSA, I go: the thing I'm the most worried about, is that we lost the middle of the pyramid of success. A lot of those folks have said: I'm out; I found something different; I want to work remotely; I can make more money. There seems there will hopefully always be a feeder system. At some point, folks get to a point in their career where you're seeing the finish line. But, the heart of our work is the middle of it.

Participant 12 described their organization as a safe space for relationship building with staff members:

I think we create a safe space by allowing folks to voice concerns, to voice needs, and to let us know if something's not going well. And I mean, by that, my door is always open and staff are able to come by to talk to me with concerns. They also want to work on ideas. I always tell them: "I can't guarantee it's going to change right now. I can't guarantee it's going to be an immediate thing. But I'm working on it. If I can do it, we're going to do it. If I'm not sure, we're going to look into it. And if I can't, I'm going to tell you.

Participant 3 highlighted the importance of creating intentional staff engagement:

We have some ways that we do it intentionally. We assign mentors to each employee. So, every new employee has a mentor assigned to them; we ask them to check in regularly. So, they have relationships on the team. And they have some kind of relationships a little bit adjacent to their team [according to their role]. So, they can grow a network here. We also really prioritize relationship building on our teams with time and budget. So that's part of how we structure our budget; is to make sure there's funds available for ongoing team building, to have a meal together, to go do a team building practice together throughout the year. So, we encourage our teams to do that every month as a professional team to have a time together, just for intentional relationship building.

Participant 10 further described how interviewing and adding new team members could affect the organization's effectiveness in working with students:

To be honest, if you can't be genuine in your work environment, you have to be genuine with your students. If you're not authentic with students, if you're not genuine, they're going to wonder why we're trying to help them. Do we have the ability to help them? Do we understand who they are? And that can be a challenge.

The four participants quoted made direct references to the ways establishing and building relationships support the practice of building trusting teams. There was consistency among the participants regarding the importance of staff relationships and student relationships. The artifacts analyzed in connection to the establishing and building relationships theme included conference presentation documents.



## ***Communication***

The theme with the second highest frequency associated with build trusting teams was communication. The entries for the communication theme included 87 interview frequencies and seven artifact frequencies, totaling 94 frequencies, accounting for 34.7% of the coded data for this variable. The 94 frequencies represented 6.4% of the overall 1,479 coded entries found by the researcher. All 12 participants in this study described elements associated with this theme. The coded sub themes found within this theme are shown along with their frequencies in Table 10, including routine team or organization meetings and supervisor feedback.

**Table 10**

*Theme: Communication*

Coded Sub Theme	Interviews Coded	Artifacts Coded	Interview Frequency	Artifact Frequency	Total Frequency	Frequency Percentage
Routine team or organization meetings	12	3	63	7	70	74.5
Supervisor feedback	5	0	24	0	24	25.5

The responses to the interview questions associated with research sub question 2 centered around how communication connects to the practice of building trusting teams. These responses highlighted how student affairs leaders used communication to ensure that information and feedback were heard and supported adequately within their organizations. The following statements from student affairs leaders indicated how communication in the form of meetings and supervisor feedback connect to the overall

theme of this practice of building trusting teams. Participant 1 described how routine team meetings are used as an opportunity to check in with staff members:

There are all the traditional meetings and exit interviews. But, I think we've got to spend a lot more time on the relational, soft touch things. And, without us being together, it's hard to know how to trust each other. And at the back end of it, what does support look like today? There's no chance we're going to have a full-time workforce every day of the week, right? And, lovingly, but jokingly, I take roll on Fridays: who's still here? You know, so I think that question is, we got to use different techniques and practices. I think we've got to make it more authentic to the relationships. And to me, we can no longer take anything for granted. I mean, there's no longer the sentiment that "at least they're here for a year." I mean, it can be a changing work environment monthly, even daily.

Participant 3 described a broader perspective on the process of supervisor feedback as a form of communication:

We have regular trainings with HR for all managers. We have supervisory orientations that really talk about holistic support and well-being as well as policies. But you know, for example, new supervisors are encouraged to think about how they welcome new employees to their work, and to think about, you know, do they walk into an office that has a plant and a card from them expressing their excitement to work with them or that they just walk into an empty space? So just considering, what are the ways that we practically show up for people and how our how our interactions affect folks. We also have regular checklists that we get. It encourages us to go beyond management to leadership

and service, and supporting our colleagues. So, we have these monthly, bigger picture, things that we do. We have monthly development for employees that really touches on holistic wellness and holistic care of a person. I think this empowerment hones in on our mission to supervise our teams well and to really take seriously our responsibility for the well-being of our employees; that it's more than just a job or a management responsibility. But it's really an opportunity to enrich the lives of our colleagues, as we do this work together.

The two participants quoted made direct references to the ways communication is used in building trusting teams. There was consistency among the participants regarding how important communication among all of the participants and stakeholders in their organizations was to the trusting team environment. The artifacts analyzed in connection to this communication theme included supervisory guides and meeting agendas.

### ***Accessibility of the Leader***

The theme with the third highest frequency associated with build trusting teams was accessibility of the leader. The entries for the accessibility of the leader theme included 51 interview frequencies and 0 artifact frequencies, totaling 51 frequencies, accounting for 18.8% of the coded data for this variable. The 51 frequencies represented 3.4% of the overall 1,479 coded entries found by the researcher. All 12 participants in this study described elements associated with this theme. The coded sub themes found within this theme are shown along with their frequencies in Table 11, including one on one interactions and meetings, routine gauges on staff, and openness to students.

**Table 11**

*Theme: Accessibility of the Leader*

Coded Sub Theme	Interviews Coded	Artifacts Coded	Interview Frequency	Artifact Frequency	Total Frequency	Frequency Percentage
One on one interactions and meetings	12	0	27	0	27	52.9
Routine gauges on staff	10	0	15	0	15	29.4
Openness to students	9	0	9	0	9	17.6

The responses to the interview questions associated with research sub question 2 centered around how the accessibility of the leader connects to the practice of building trusting teams. These responses highlighted how student affairs leaders should be open to meeting and speaking with their staff members and the students at their institutions. The following statements from student affairs leaders indicated how accessibility through interactions with staff and students connect to the overall theme of this practice of building trusting teams. Participant 10 described how opening up spaces for others to interact and engage is a part of the student-facing industry:

We just have the supporting mindset to begin with. We create safe spaces and we know that that's important to our students who are in distress. So, we need to do that for ourselves as well. It doesn't matter if you do it one on one with someone; you want to just process with everybody.

Participant 2 highlighted the check-in process with staff members:

I think, as an industry, we're getting in that “be careful of what you say around family” and bleeding boundaries type of thing. And yet, as a leader, you want to know that I care about you, right? Like what's important to you? Because it's important to you, it is important to me. I have found that stressed out people do not do their best work. And so, you know, really recognizing where we are for that. So, I feel like trust is in units, but not necessarily as an organization overall. And I would say that's not just Student Affairs. That's as our university. And it's really hard. Because, you've got people who are doing the work and who need to feel supported.

Participant 7 further described how their organization is structured in a way that allows staff members to voice their perspectives to the group:

We don't make decisions unilaterally really very much. It's the team. Each member of the team then goes back to their divisions and they get consultation and they come back with feedback. So, I think just by being iterative, by being democratic, it models a way of engaging with others for our students.

Participant 8 highlighted the importance of being open to students in higher education:

We have had some candid conversations amongst staff. Like, what can we do? This relates to hiring practices and trying to get space for students, primarily for African American students, because they really felt isolated on this campus. What can we do? Is there a lot going in that direction? Anything going to LGBTQ folks? Going towards undocumented? They don't necessarily feel connected, so that was a challenge. So, I think a lot of people, administrators, especially at the

middle level, don't know what we could do, because [support for these students] hasn't been institutionalized.

Participant 11 touched upon how students have insight and feedback on the processes and procedures with which they engage:

For students, I think the most important thing, which we try to do during exit interviews, or even in the interviews for returning students, is ask them, what could we do better? What could we improve? If you ask them, they usually have opinions.

The five participants quoted made direct references to the ways the leader's accessibility is connected to building trusting teams. There was consistency among the participants regarding how important being open to the organization's stakeholders was to the trusting team environment.

### **Research Sub Question 3: Study Your Worthy Rival**

Research sub question 3 asked, "How do exemplary student affairs leaders perceive the practice of study your worth rival is embedded in their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results?" For this study, worthy rivals are successful industry leaders who perform as well as or better than a leader or their organization. Leaders or organizations are inspired to study these players and improve based on the strengths and abilities identified in them (Millennial Executive, 2021; Sinek, 2019).

Two interview questions were used to collect data from the participants to understand how they perceive the practice of study your worthy rival is embedded in their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results. The first interview

question sought to explore how the organization learns from other successful leaders or organizations. The second interview question sought to explore how people within the organization learn from other successful people holding similar positions.

The researcher organized the data into three categories that connected to the third research sub question of the study. These three categories or themes included 184 interview frequencies among 12 interviews and 25 artifact frequencies across two artifacts. All 12, or 100%, of the participants spoke to each of the sub themes of this study. Table 12 provides an overview of the coded data for study your worthy rival broken down by the three themes: cross-campus and cross-functional areas, cross-institutions, and mentorship. Figure 7 provides a visual representation of the frequencies of coded entries for study your worthy rival: cross-campus and cross-functional areas, cross-institutions, and mentorship.

**Table 12**

*Overall Coded Entries for Study Your Worthy Rival*

Themes	Interviews Coded	Artifacts Coded	Interview Frequency	Artifact Frequency	Total Frequency	Frequency Percentage
Cross-Campus and Cross-Functional Areas	12	2	84	25	109	52.2
Cross-Institutions	12	0	60	0	60	28.7
Mentorship	12	0	40	0	40	19.1

**Figure 7**

*Frequencies and Percentages: Data for Study Your Worthy Rival*



***Cross-Campus and Cross-Functional Areas***

The theme with the highest frequency associated with study your worthy rival was cross-campus and cross-functional areas. The entries for the cross-campus and cross-functional areas theme included 84 interview frequencies and 25 artifact frequencies, totaling 109 frequencies, accounting for 52.2% of the coded data for this variable. The 109 frequencies represented 7.4% of the overall 1,479 coded entries found by the researcher. All 12 participants in this study described elements associated with this theme. The coded sub themes found within this theme are shown along with their frequencies in Table 13, including best practices for working with students, engagement with other departments, and central campus needs.



**Table 13***Theme: Cross-Campus and Cross-Functional Areas*

Coded Sub Theme	Interviews Coded	Artifacts Coded	Interview Frequency	Artifact Frequency	Total Frequency	Frequency Percentage
Best practices working with students	12	1	35	20	55	50.5
Engagement with other departments	12	0	28	0	28	25.7
Central campus needs	8	1	21	5	26	23.9

The responses to the interview questions associated with research sub question 3 centered around cross-campus and cross-functional areas supporting the practice of studying your worthy rival. These responses highlighted how the student affairs leaders perceived the cross-campus culture with respect to learning about new practices and engaging with other staff members. The following statements from student affairs leaders indicated that their organizations either collaborated with or mirrored other organizations across campus or their respective divisions as a way to study their worthy rivals. Participant 3 indicated that their organization continuously tries to learn about best practices when it comes to working with students:

We do a lot of benchmarking with peer institutions. And then with peer work. So typically, if we have initiatives, where we're also looking out at evidence-based practices; we're looking at research; we're talking to our peers in the fields; we're looking at peer schools in our area. And that informs our work. We also attend national conferences, where we network with other folks in the field.

Participant 3 further explained their involvement with other departments:

Our annual reports, each year, undergo peer review from other department directors. And so, every department director participates in peer review of department annual reports within the university. So, you'll be assigned to a team of reviewers. And you'll review a specific assignment of annual reports and give feedback, which is really helpful. So, we have to start with the internal perspective. But we get other professionals' understanding and insight into the work that we do, and vice versa.

Participant 1 discussed how central campus needs can bring staff members together to collaborate:

Thinking through all the stuff of our work that isn't in a box and trying to think through the term, SAMs, which are the student affairs monitors. I don't care if it's a football game or today, it's the regents meeting. That's a skill set. It's a different working style; it crosses over different levels; it's as much about relational building and then putting people in. These are opportunities where skills can be used in different contexts.

The two participants quoted made direct references to the way cross-campus collaboration and perspectives support the practice of studying your worthy rival within their organizations. There was consistency among the participants regarding how understanding and learning about how other organizations at the same institution can benefit their own organizations in how they work with students. The artifacts analyzed in connection to the cross-campus and cross-functional areas theme included department reports.

### ***Cross Institutions***

The theme with the second highest frequency associated with study your worthy rival was cross institutions. The entries for the cross institutions theme included 60 interview frequencies and 0 artifact frequencies, totaling 60 frequencies, accounting for 28.7% of the coded data for this variable. The 60 frequencies represented 4.1% of the overall 1,479 coded entries found by the researcher. All 12 participants in this study described elements associated with this theme. The coded sub themes found within this theme are shown along with their frequencies in Table 14, including public university systems, professional associations, and neighboring institutions.

**Table 14**

*Theme: Cross Institutions*

Coded Sub Theme	Interviews Coded	Artifacts Coded	Interview Frequency	Artifact Frequency	Total Frequency	Frequency Percentage
Public university systems	12	0	29	0	29	48.3
Professional associations	10	0	21	0	21	35
Neighboring institutions	7	0	10	0	10	16.7

The responses to the interview questions associated with research sub question 3 centered around cross institutions and relationships among similar and neighboring institutions supporting the practice of studying your worthy rival. These responses highlighted how the student affairs leaders perceived the relationships their organizations have with other similar organizations at other institutions with respect to learning about

new practices and ways of handling different situations. The following statements from student affairs leaders indicated that their organizations learned from other institutions as a way to study their worthy rivals. Participant 1 described the relationships their organization has developed over time upon which they rely for insight and advice:

I'll get called to go to [another institution across the city], and we'll call people over from there; where do you have two great universities in the world about 11 miles apart? So, being able ask each other: what's a fad? And what's a trend? We're all going through it together. Then let's understand and learn from each other. We're in the [state university] system, so you have a built-in network. And then we've been tapping into our business school. The combination of business continuity and the entrepreneurial mindset helps us rethink through some of the opportunities and challenges. We've got field study [through the business school], as we speak, and the topic is in our work and serving students. Not that there's a definite answer, but when is our work that of an activist and when is our work that of an advocate, and thinking through a business lens, like a business case?

Participant 6 described the importance of and participation in professional associations:

We are a member institution of the ACUI, which is the Association for College Union's International. We send staff every year to our regional conferences and our national conference, to learn best practices, to hear from different speakers, both as professional development for the individuals, but also as an opportunity to learn and bring back information.

Participant 9 further described professional networks with neighboring and similar institutions:

One way we learn from other institutions is benchmarking data. There's a lot of national surveys that can provide us data on how you compare to other institutions that gives you a point of reference. We also have peer-to-peer colleges by location and size that we often are, in some ways competing with or kind of checking in with, but using them as resources; developing relationships, professional relationships to say, "Hey, how are you managing this? What are you doing with this?"

The three participants quoted made direct references to the way relationships across different institutions support the practice of studying your worthy rival within their organizations. There was consistency among the participants regarding how understanding and learning about how other organizations at different institutions can benefit their own organizations in terms of how they work with students.

### ***Mentorship***

The theme with the third highest frequency associated with study your worthy rival was mentorship. The entries for the mentorship theme included 40 interview frequencies and 0 artifact frequencies, totaling 40 frequencies, accounting for 19.1% of the coded data for this variable. The 40 frequencies represented 2.7% of the overall 1,479 coded entries found by the researcher. All 12 participants in this study described elements associated with this theme. The coded sub themes found within this theme are shown along with their frequencies in Table 15, including institutionalized mentorship program and professional development relationships.

**Table 15**

*Theme: Mentorship*

Coded Sub Theme	Interviews Coded	Artifacts Coded	Interview Frequency	Artifact Frequency	Total Frequency	Frequency Percentage
Institutionalized mentorship program	12	0	28	0	28	70.0
Professional development relationships	4	0	12	0	12	30.0

The responses to the interview questions associated with research sub question 3 centered around how mentorship supports the practice of studying your worthy rival. These responses highlighted how the student affairs leaders perceived the formal and informal relationships the members of their organizations have to others with respect to learning about new practices and ways of handling different situations. The following statements from student affairs leaders indicated that mentorship relationships connected to the practice of studying your worthy rivals. Participant 4 described their organization’s formalized mentorship program:

When you’re in a position where you have access to different leaders, you’re able to assist one another especially those looking to grow and continue to understand the university better as a whole. You’ve got to create those opportunities, so sometimes, it’s through a leadership program. We’ve been doing this student affairs leadership academy for awhile now and when a new cohort goes through, we’re really trying to provide a breadth of experience for people and exposure to different leaders so that they can then follow up and have specific mentorship relationships.

Participant 2 described how leaders could establish professional development relationships:

I love to reach out and talk to people, like, what's your next step? And people reach out to me about that. They know want to know where their next career step will be. Informational interviews in the form of just coffee breaks. Because we're such a relational campus, that works very well here. I think more formal campuses, that's harder to do. But I see that happening a lot, especially when new people come on board. So, they really want to know, like, "Okay, you were a ResLife coordinator. And now you're Provost, how did that happen?" I think those are great stories.

Participant 8 described the central role and responsibilities of the student-facing member of the organization and how it centers the relationships that staff members can have with one another:

Our job is to serve students and the role of advisors is to develop relationships with their students. When we do this, this will improve our retention rates. They are very clear in what they're doing. Creating opportunities for the managers to work together as teams. They create opportunities for the learning community, all of the advisors to come together to not only network but for professional development opportunities, and then also to network with one another, and share best practice advice and experiences and create opportunities for advisors to present to the advising community, so they can put that on their resume for their growth opportunities. This is an institutionalized framework.

Participant 10 further described the learning process that takes place within the professional scope of their institution and others:

We look at things that are happening at other universities that we might encounter, or we have encountered, and see how the leaders in the response; how they took that on and responded to the situation, which is very important. You always have to be learning in this work, whether it's from a professional colleague or someone in a similar role at different institutions, because everything's changing on a college campus.

The four participants quoted made direct references to the way mentorship supports the practice of studying your worthy rival within their organizations. There was consistency among the participants regarding how mentoring and learning relationships can benefit staff members within their organizations in their professional development and in their day-to-day work.

#### **Research Sub Question 4: Preparing for Existential Flexibility**

Research sub question 4 asked, “How do exemplary student affairs leaders perceive the practice of preparing for existential flexibility is embedded in their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results?” For this study, existential flexibility is a leader’s ability to anticipate changing conditions and initiate a potentially risky strategic disruption to set the organization on a new path necessary to achieve the idealized future (Avolio, 2005; Dhiman, 2011; Goleman, 1995; Owen, 2015; Sinek, 2019). Two interview questions were used in the study to collect data from the participants to understand how they perceive the practice of preparing for existential flexibility is embedded in their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary



results. The first interview question sought to identify how new opportunities emerge within the organization to achieve the organization’s vision. The second interview question sought to explore an example or case when staying on the same path was not going to fulfill the organization’s just cause.

The researcher organized the data into three categories that connected to the fourth research sub question of the study. These three categories or themes included 174 interview frequencies among 12 interviews and 30 artifact frequencies across five artifacts. All 12, or 100%, of the participants spoke to each of the sub themes of this study. Table 16 provides an overview of the coded data for preparing for existential flexibility broken down by the three themes: student feedback, needs assessment, and strategic thinking. Figure 8 provides a visual representation of the frequencies of coded entries for preparing for existential flexibility: student feedback, needs assessment, and strategic thinking.

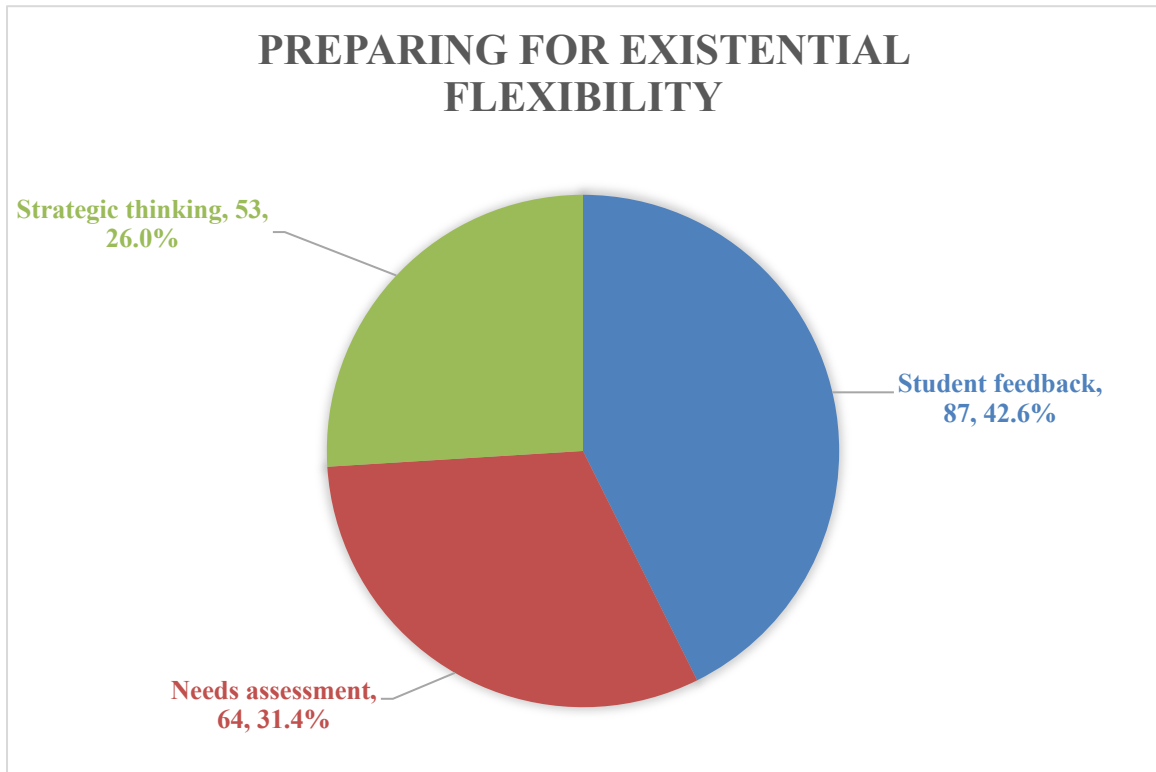
**Table 16**

*Overall Coded Entries for Preparing for Existential Flexibility*

Themes	Interviews Coded	Artifacts Coded	Interview Frequency	Artifact Frequency	Total Frequency	Frequency Percentage
Student Feedback	12	5	65	22	87	42.6
Needs Assessment	12	0	64	0	64	31.4
Strategic Thinking	12	1	45	8	53	26.0

**Figure 8**

*Frequencies and Percentages: Data for Preparing for Existential Flexibility*



***Student Feedback***

The theme with the highest frequency associated with preparing for existential flexibility was student feedback. The entries for the student feedback theme included 65 interview frequencies and 22 artifact frequencies, totaling 87 frequencies, accounting for 42.6% of the coded data for this variable. The 87 frequencies represented 5.9% of the overall 1,479 coded entries found by the researcher. All twelve participants in this study described elements associated with this theme. The coded sub themes found within this theme are shown along with their frequencies in Table 17, including openness to students' perspectives, starting each academic year with a fresh perspective, and focus on student needs.

**Table 17**

*Theme: Student Feedback*

Coded Sub Theme	Interviews Coded	Artifacts Coded	Interview Frequency	Artifact Frequency	Total Frequency	Frequency Percentage
Openness to students' perspectives	12	3	27	12	39	44.8
Starting each academic year with a fresh perspective	5	1	25	6	31	35.6
Focus on student needs	5	1	13	4	17	19.5

The responses to the interview questions associated with research sub question 4 centered around student feedback and its connection to the practice of preparing for existential flexibility. These responses highlighted how the student affairs leaders perceived the importance of student feedback. The following statements from student affairs leaders indicated that student feedback and having the student-centered approach to their work was important in preparing for existential flexibility. Participant 2 described their organization's process in considering the student perspective when it comes to their work:

I think that what the students want aligns with national pressure, like our “ED and I” our diversity, equity, and inclusion stuff. We lead with equity. I have really pushed forward student initiatives. And there have been opportunities around that. So, we have a black thriving initiative. A lot of good work has come through doing outreach and asking hard questions; hosting hard, challenging symposiums. But, from the perspective of the students, the work needed to be done. And I think

that the opportunity sometimes comes from things that aren't always the most positive. And those have been exciting to see people like staff get on board with them.

Participant 7 described how their organization needed to reflect upon their institution's legacy and how they support their current students:

In an organization where there's so many competing priorities, our facilities team was working with this recycling center, which was a distraction from our other more mission-critical work. So, we went through an analysis process and proposed to close it, which we did. That was a difficult decision, because it's eliminating part of our legacy. It wasn't serving our students on campus anymore, but was funded by our organization, sourced by student fees.

Participant 3 discussed the need for evaluations and assessment to determine if their programs and initiatives are meeting student needs:

I would say we have a rigorous annual process to set objectives, key results, evaluate our student outcomes as learning outcomes to explore what practices are working toward meeting those learning outcomes on a regular basis. What learning outcomes are major programs supporting or working toward. And then each year, we assess the curriculum, map our learning outcomes, our key results, objectives, all of those things, and we have some good input time to write up what our future goals will be for the next year, what our future objectives will be. And that's really an opportunity to incorporate change and new practices and best practices that emerge in response to student life.

Participant 6 further described how assessments need to focus on the students as stakeholders in their programs:

Separately from the strategic plan, in each of the departments, there's an expectation of completing assessments for after events or after a series of events. Then there's the end of the semester and end of the year surveys. We're consistently trying to get feedback from our stakeholders, AKA our students, to make sure that we're creating events and opportunities that they want to see.

The four participants quoted made direct references to the ways student feedback is imperative to preparing for existential flexibility in higher education. There was consistency among the participants regarding how listening to students and considering their needs as primary stakeholders at their institutions were critical in their organizations' operations and decision-making processes. The artifacts analyzed in connection to the student feedback theme included divisional strategic plans and department reports.

### ***Needs Assessment***

The theme with the second highest frequency associated with preparing for existential flexibility was needs assessment. The entries for the needs assessment theme included 64 interview frequencies and 0 artifact frequencies, totaling 64 frequencies, accounting for 31.3% of the coded data for this variable. The 64 frequencies represented 4.3% of the overall 1,479 coded entries found by the researcher. All 12 participants in this study described elements associated with this theme. The coded sub themes found within this theme are shown along with their frequencies in Table 18, including

evaluating current programs and initiatives, identifying areas of need, and taking action and adapting to needs.

**Table 18**

*Theme: Needs Assessment*

Coded Sub Theme	Interviews Coded	Artifacts Coded	Interview Frequency	Artifact Frequency	Total Frequency	Frequency Percentage
Evaluating current programs and initiatives	12	0	31	0	31	48.4
Identifying areas of need	12	0	23	0	23	35.9
Taking action and adapting to needs	10	0	10	0	10	15.7

The responses to the interview questions associated with research sub question 4 centered around needs assessment and its connection to the practice of preparing for existential flexibility. These responses highlighted how the student affairs leaders perceived the importance of needs assessment. The following statements from student affairs leaders indicated that assessments, evaluations, and reflections were important in preparing for existential flexibility. Participant 6 described the assessment and evaluation process of their programs:

Among the full time staff, we've divvied up the different focus areas and we participated in subcommittees that developed and evaluated our work. Recently, over the last semester, we did a SWOT analysis on the focus areas, like marketing policies and procedures, staff experience, and student experience.

Participant 1 provided an example of identifying an area of need for their institution:

I'll use the example when we had a water main flood. Everybody was looking at as property damage. And I remember being in the room raising my hand, I said: "this is people damage; this is people's way of life; this is not only their vehicle." I had to close buildings and we couldn't do summer camps the rest of the summer. So, what are people doing with their children? I think trying to keep it front and center that way, I know, for us, while going through the pandemic committees, I chaired the first cares funding allocation committee. And at the end of the day, it was about dispersing resources, but it was keeping us grounded as we're trying to meet needs, or we're trying to understand what the current needs are? I mean, I go back to basic needs. All of us learned, in the pandemic, the most basic needs was Wi-Fi access as an example. And so really trying to ground it, which I would hope, is the role of student services, at least in higher education, but if you aren't grounded on the needs of the students, then you're just becoming a transactional environment.

Participant 4 described how their organization needed to adapt to needs and take action:

No institution is going to say students don't come first. It's how do we maybe though incorporate some of the principles, even if we don't use the same language in a way that gets the benefit of what other industries might be doing, that are more effective than what we have done. So, I think that those are some of the ways that I think you infuse new ideas, new goals, new vision, into the work that you're doing, but you got to make it a commitment, you got to make it a priority. Otherwise, the work of the work will take over.

Participant 10 described how their organization could learn from others:

There's always new ways for us to communicate our work to different populations. There's always new ways to get feedback on our work. Some of that's from presentations, but nothing's stagnant in this work. We'll hear from another office that they're doing something different that could benefit our office in the work we do in this way. We've had to reinvent and retool ourselves all the time. We get those ideas from many different ways and different campus partners to make sure we stay on track with our vision.

The four participants quoted made direct references to the ways student feedback was imperative to preparing for existential flexibility in higher education. There was consistency among the participants regarding how listening to students and considering their needs as primary stakeholders at their institutions were critical in their organizations' operations and decision-making processes.

### ***Strategic Thinking***

The theme with the third highest frequency associated with preparing for existential flexibility was strategic thinking. The entries for the strategic thinking theme included 45 interview frequencies and eight artifact frequencies, totaling 53 frequencies, accounting for 26.1% of the coded data for this variable. The 53 frequencies represented 3.6% of the overall 1,479 coded entries found by the researcher. All 12 participants in this study described elements associated with this theme. The coded sub themes found within this theme are shown along with their frequencies in Table 18, including evaluating institutional/division strategic plan and perspectives on staff professional development.



**Table 19**

*Theme: Strategic Thinking*

Coded Sub Theme	Interviews Coded	Artifacts Coded	Interview Frequency	Artifact Frequency	Total Frequency	Frequency Percentage
Evaluating institutional/division strategic plan	8	1	31	8	39	73.6
Perspectives on staff professional development	8	0	14	0	14	26.4

The responses to the interview questions associated with research sub question 4 centered around strategic thinking and its connection to the practice of preparing for existential flexibility. These responses highlighted how the student affairs leaders perceived the importance of strategic thinking and planning at the leadership and administrative level. The following statements from student affairs leaders indicated that documenting and planning among campus leadership was important in preparing for existential flexibility. Participant 4 described how their organization needed to reevaluate their work and capacity to support students:

The university is not going to solve each and every person's individual journey. And sometimes, I think, because we want to be everything to everybody, we sometimes miss the mark of how we can achieve the original goal, which is to help shift the institution, from the institutional barriers to different student population groups. And so, we've had to adjust how much case management versus how much population we can support. And so, I think continuing having those difficult conversations, because when you have a student in front of you,

that has a need, you want to just help and solve that. And yet, we have to continue to think about the systemic issues and changes that we need to invest into.

Participant 9 further described how their organization needed to make changes to ensure staff members were supported in their work:

We shifted our model because if we had stayed on the same path, it wasn't going to be sustainable. We weren't addressing the needs of the staff. We were addressing on the needs of the student, but it just wasn't sustainable. It impacted staff and morale and our ability to be efficient, so we needed to take action and make changes.

The two participants quoted made direct references to the ways strategic thinking was imperative to preparing for existential flexibility in higher education. There was consistency among the participants regarding how continuous evaluation of their organizations' strategic plans allowed them to maintain focus on their core visions and values. The artifacts analyzed in connection to the strategic thinking theme included divisional strategic plans and department reports.

#### **Research Sub Question 5: Demonstrating the Courage to Lead**

Research sub question 5 was, "How do exemplary student affairs leaders perceive the practice of demonstrating the courage to lead is embedded in their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results?" For this study, the courage to lead is a leader's ability to stand up against/to pressures or norms that do not align with organizational or individual goals and values and is characterized by the willingness to take risks for sustained success in an unknown, idealized future (Lassiter, 2021; Sinek, 2019). Two interview questions were used to collect data from the participants to

understand how they perceive the practice of demonstrating the courage to lead is embedded in their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results. The first interview question sought to explore how the organization stays aligned with its values and goals when it is pressured to take a different path. The second interview question sought to identify how the organization models the willingness to take risks.

The researcher organized the data into three categories that connected to the fifth research sub question. These three categories or themes included 163 interview frequencies among 12 interviews and 21 artifact frequencies across four artifacts. All 12, or 100%, of the participants spoke to each of the sub themes of this study. Table 20 provides an overview of the coded data for demonstrating the courage to lead broken down by the three themes: modeling and mentoring, transparency, and awareness of values and goals. Figure 9 provides a visual representation of the frequencies of coded entries for demonstrating the courage to lead: modeling and mentoring, transparency, and awareness of values and goals.

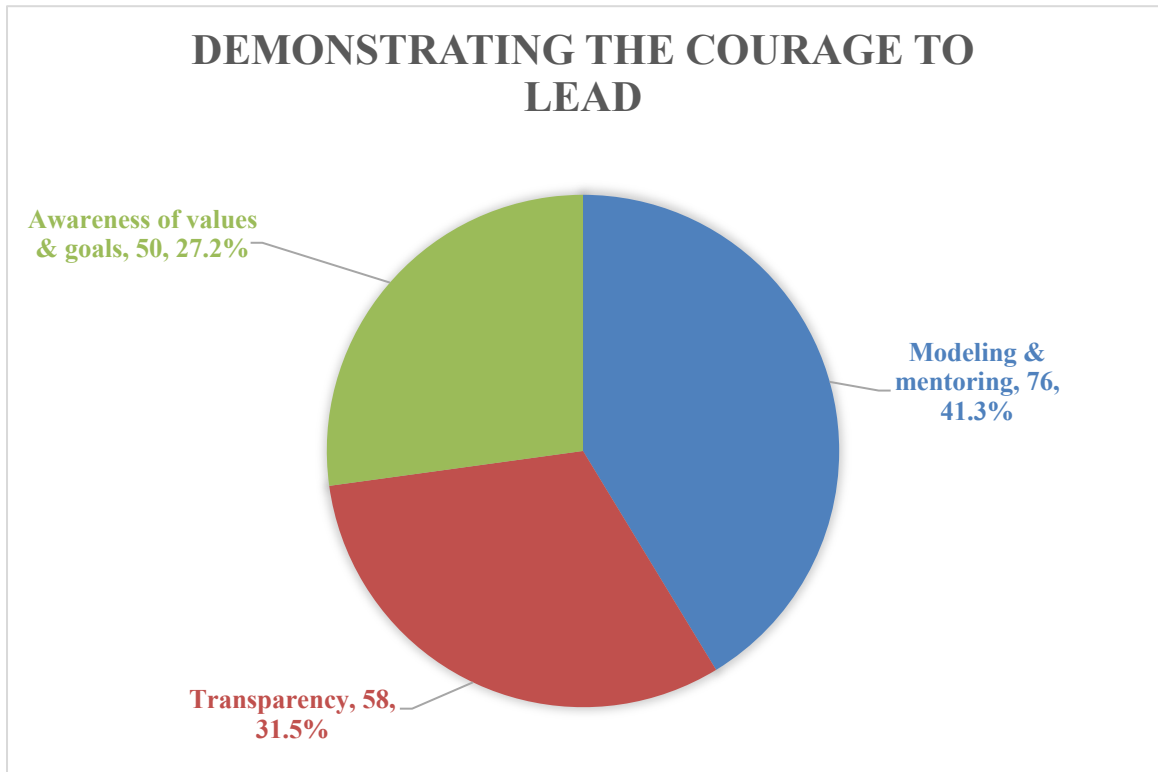
**Table 20**

*Overall Coded Entries for Demonstrating the Courage to Lead*

Themes	Interviews Coded	Artifacts Coded	Interview Frequency	Artifact Frequency	Total Frequency	Frequency Percentage
Modeling and Mentoring	12	2	61	15	76	41.3
Transparency	12	3	52	6	58	31.5
Awareness of Values and Goals	12	0	50	0	50	27.2

**Figure 9**

*Frequencies and Percentages: Data for Demonstrating the Courage to Lead*



***Modeling and Mentoring***

The theme with the highest frequency associated with demonstrating the courage to lead was modeling and mentoring. The entries for the modeling and mentoring theme included 61 interview frequencies and 15 artifact frequencies, totaling 76 frequencies, accounting for 41.3% of the coded data for this variable. The 76 frequencies represented 5.1% of the overall 1,479 coded entries found by the researcher. All 12 participants in this study described elements associated with this theme. The coded sub themes found within this theme are shown along with their frequencies in Table 21, including visualizing how initiatives can be used internally and connecting with others.

**Table 21***Theme: Modeling and Mentoring*

Coded Sub Theme	Interviews Coded	Artifacts Coded	Interview Frequency	Artifact Frequency	Total Frequency	Frequency Percentage
Visualizing how initiatives can be used internally	12	0	37	0	37	48.7
Connecting with others	12	2	24	15	39	51.3

The responses to the interview questions associated with research sub question 5 centered around modeling and mentoring. These responses highlighted how the student affairs leaders connected modeling and mentoring with a foundation in relationship building to the practice of demonstrating the courage to lead. The following statements from student affairs leaders indicated that their organizations observed others to understand how to best approach their work and sought relationships to strengthen their capacity and comfortability to take risks. Participant 3 described the collaborative environment in their organization and how agency is given to staff members:

We work really collaboratively. We're a little bit flattened in terms of organization. So, we regularly meet as a team, with multi-level staff involved. We have different committees; we do a lot of our work by committee. So instead of having a director or an associate director who's in charge of these things; we have a committee with a chair. And so, an entry-level staff member might be the chair for committee that has other folks on it, for example. So, we do that within our department; we also do that within our division. So, in the collective Student Affairs, there could be, two entry level employees who are chairing a committee

that has associate deans on it. And so, there's really a lot of opportunity, I think, for input, and for fostering discussion around best practices at all levels.

Participant 7 highlighted the collaborative nature of their organization with both students and staff:

The willingness to take risks is fundamental to who we are. We are an enterprising organization. We're running businesses, students and staff are collaborating to run businesses on campus. And so, taking risk is really part of who we are.

Participant 9 described their organization's perspective on risks and opportunities:

We are a learning organization. We have to stay current. That means that we have to see where we're at and where we still want to go. That creates opportunities. I would say not even framing them as risk because risk means that we're losing something, or that it's something dangerous. With the idea of the opportunity, this is something that we can do and try out and it has a benefit to us. We're not losing our core, our purpose.

The three participants quoted made direct references to the ways modeling and mentoring are integrated into the relationships among staff members of their respective organizations. There was consistency among the participants regarding how these relationships and the empowerment to lead allowed the organizations to be more willing to take risks. The artifacts analyzed in connection to the modeling and mentoring theme included department reports.

## *Transparency*

The theme with the second highest frequency associated with demonstrating the courage to lead was transparency. The entries for the transparency theme included 52 interview frequencies and six artifact frequencies, totaling 58 frequencies, accounting for 31.5% of the coded data for this variable. The 58 frequencies represented 3.5% of the overall 1,479 coded entries found by the researcher. All 12 participants in this study described elements associated with this theme. The coded sub themes found within this theme are shown along with their frequencies in Table 22, including communication from administration and direct communication to students.

**Table 22**

*Theme: Transparency*

Coded Sub Theme	Interviews Coded	Artifacts Coded	Interview Frequency	Artifact Frequency	Total Frequency	Frequency Percentage
Communication from administration	12	0	36	0	36	62.1
Direct communication to students	10	3	16	6	22	37.9

The responses to the interview questions associated with research sub question 5 centered around transparency. These responses highlighted how the student affairs leaders connected transparency in communication and actions to the practice of demonstrating the courage to lead. The following statements from student affairs leaders indicated that the transparency of their work would allow stakeholders to understand the different perspectives that administrators and leads may have on specific issues or situations. Participant 4 described a top-down perspective on how risks can be perceived:

I will say that so much depends on leadership. And I see that time and time again. And you model it, I think top down. And if it's not there, then you're not going to take those risks, that organization might stay a bit flat until you're able to infuse leaders with leadership skills and the sense of willing to take that risk. And I have a department like this right now, where, it's beginning to rumble, because the staff is hesitant in the leadership because they aren't confident in their own skills, and the leadership is more conservative around its approach; and cautious and safe, understandably, as a department that carries a lot of risks just inherently.

Participant 11 discussed how their institution approaches communication to external entities with respect to transparency:

Our university is an inclusive university. Our students don't have to affiliate with any sort of faith background or other kinds of life experience in order to be a student here. It's open and accessible to anyone. So, I have seen external organizations try to pressure university leadership and the university at-large to make a statement on particular issues that would have conflicted with their stance on student autonomy. They've just politely declined and explained that this is a student-focused institution and they have freedom of speech on campus.

Participant 1 described how institutions like theirs communicate directly to students:

This campus is the "ready aim fire" campus, we laugh at our colleagues that they're a "fire and aim later" campus. When you're dealing with unprecedented times, you certainly want to be prudent, and you certainly want to do things. But when all bets are off, you have to assess the risk and reward. And sometimes the risk is listening to a new idea. And sometimes a risk is saying even though we



have done this this way, what if we did it a different way? You know, sometimes it's understanding that students are [persistent], because they've emailed me five times, and maybe I should meet with them, and listen to him. I think, hopefully, even being here 34 years, I try to be the new person. And again, both try to role model that and make it, the top priority to continually listen to the new perspectives, especially from students.

Participant 8 further described transparency with respect to students:

I am from that perspective that [college] is supposed to be the place where you exchange ideas, regardless of what those ideas are. For example, look at a speech debate team. I want to see you argue your position. I don't care what the position is. All for them to stand up and debate those ideas, instead of shutting things down on this campus. You, as someone supporting students, take the risk, so they feel safe to do so.

The four participants quoted made direct references to the ways transparency opens up stakeholders in the higher education field to the understanding and awareness of how and why decisions are made. There was consistency among the participants regarding how transparency to staff and students allowed the organizations to be more willing to take risks. The artifacts analyzed in connection to the modeling and mentoring theme included department reports and institution statements.

### *Awareness of Values and Goals*

The theme with the third highest frequency associated with demonstrating the courage to lead was awareness of values and goals. The entries for the awareness of values and goals theme included 50 interview frequencies and 0 artifact frequencies,

totaling 50 frequencies, accounting for 27.2% of the coded data for this variable. The 50 frequencies represented 3.4% of the overall 1,479 coded entries found by the researcher. All 12 participants in this study described elements associated with this theme. The coded sub themes found within this theme are shown along with their frequencies in Table 23, including student-centered approaches and alignment of staff and students.

**Table 23**

*Theme: Awareness of Values and Goals*

Coded Sub Theme	Interviews Coded	Artifacts Coded	Interview Frequency	Artifact Frequency	Total Frequency	Frequency Percentage
Student-centered approaches	12	0	35	0	35	70.0
Alignment of staff and students	8	0	15	0	15	30.0

The responses to the interview questions associated with research sub question 5 centered around awareness of values and goals. These responses highlighted how the student affairs leaders connected awareness of values and goals to the practice of demonstrating the courage to lead. The following statements from student affairs leaders indicated that spreading the awareness of the organization’s values and goals among the staff members further encourages risk-taking and acting upon innovative ideas.

Participant 2 described how the student perspectives have changed over the years and that the work has shifted:

I just came out of a meeting where we have some of our student leaders really challenging the way contracts have been written and compensation. The whole system does it in a way that it’s not going to fly. Our students are different. Our

students from this generation are different. They're expecting different things. They have different needs that need to be supported differently. So, something we used five years ago, 12 years ago, certainly 20 years ago, may does not cut it anymore. And so, I think there are definitely policies and practices that we can look at. Why are we putting so much on the administrative focus on some things when what we could just really be doing is working with our students?

Participant 11 went on to describe a trend that has shifted the work to maintain the value of being student-focused:

A lot of students are choosing the transfer route. Some universities are opting to not even entertain transfers; they won't look at their applications. I would say that my current university in the past has been very focused on the first year experience and on that four year undergraduate experience, but I think it's really transformed in the last 10 years. I think that the university is understanding that transferring and student accesses really increases general access and affordability that then connected to increasing excellence within our student body and diversifying the lived experiences of student here.

Participant 2 offered an example of a student-driven initiative and how staff and the institution aligned altogether:

What are you doing with all this money when you're not running all this programming? At our institution, the students voted and they moved all the money to basic needs. That's amazing, right? Like what a way to support students, especially in this time of crisis. No one knows what's going on when we're not open on campus to serve food, right? Yet, the bureaucracy around it kicks in. Can

we even do that? How is that legal? What are the policies say? What are the rules say? How does this impact the administrative and the high level folks? And so, here goes the trust element, right? Like, I'm getting beat up for something that students voted for, which seemed like a really good idea. And then, you know, a year later when we're doing our achievements for the year, and [students] gave all this money to basic needs and it's one of their highlights. So it's hard. It's risky on the staff side. And I can see why it's risky for administration...It's a marathon, not a sprint.

The two participants quoted made direct references to the prevalence of values and goals in the work they do when their organizations are challenged to make changes or take on a new initiative. There was consistency among the participants regarding how awareness of values and goals allowed the organizations to be more willing to take risks.

### **Research Sub Questions 6: Organizational Support and Barriers**

Research sub question 6 asked, “What are the organizational supports and barriers do exemplary student affairs leaders perceive affect the embedding of infinite mindset practices within their organization?” For this study, an infinite mindset is a leader’s desire to inspire their organization to continually learn and grow to achieve profound results that extend into the future without limits. A leader with an infinite mindset follows five essential practices: advance a just cause, build trusting teams, study their worthy rivals, prepare for existential flexibility, and demonstrate the courage to lead (Carse, 1986; Dweck, 2007; Sinek, 2019).

Two interview questions were used to collect data from the participants regarding how they perceive the organizational supports and barriers affect the development of an

infinite mindset in their organization. The first interview question sought to describe the supports that exist in organizations that foster the embedding of the infinite mindset practices. The second interview question sought to describe the barriers that exist in organizations that hinder the embedding of the infinite mindset practices.

The researcher organized the data into four categories that connected to the sixth research sub question. These four categories or themes included 189 interview frequencies among 12 interviews and 34 artifact frequencies across six artifacts. All 12, or 100%, of the participants spoke to each of the sub themes of this study. Table 24 provides an overview of the coded data for organizational supports and barriers broken down by the four themes: relationship building, transferable skills and collaboration, lack of resources, and resistance to change. Figure 10 provides a visual representation of the frequencies of coded entries for organizational supports and barriers: relationship building, transferable skills and collaboration, lack of resources, and resistance to change.

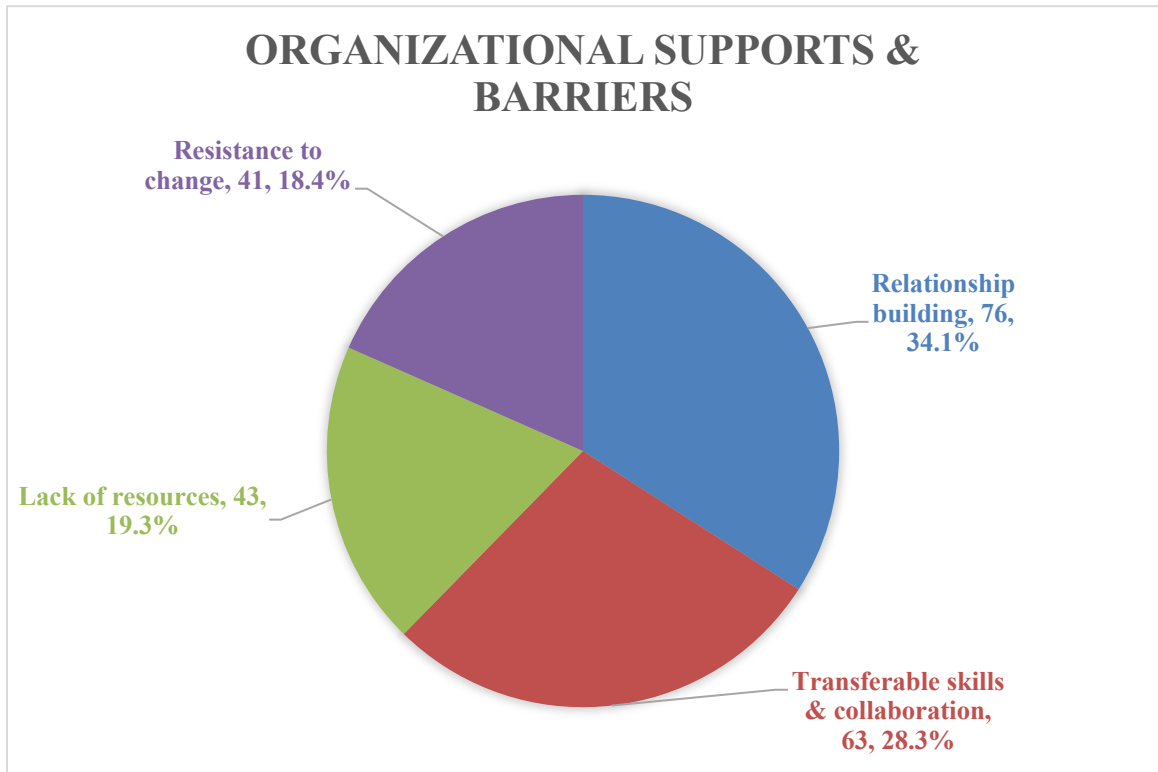
**Table 24**

*Overall Coded Entries for Organizational Supports and Barriers*

Themes	Interviews Coded	Artifacts Coded	Interview Frequency	Artifact Frequency	Total Frequency	Frequency Percentage
Relationship Building	12	6	57	19	76	34.1
Transferable Skills and Collaboration	12	4	48	15	63	28.3
Lack of Resources	12	0	43	0	43	19.3
Resistance to Change	12	0	41	0	41	18.4

**Figure 10**

*Frequencies and Percentages: Data for Supports and Barriers*



***Relationship Building***

The theme with the highest frequency associated with organizational supports and barriers was relationship building. The entries for the relationship building theme included 57 interview frequencies and 19 artifact frequencies, totaling 76 frequencies, accounting for 34.0% of the coded data for this variable. The 76 frequencies represented 5.1% of the overall 1,479 coded entries found by the researcher. All 12 participants in this study described elements associated with this theme. The coded sub themes found within this theme are shown along with their frequencies in Table 25, including one on one relationships with staff and students and intentional engagement opportunities.

**Table 25**

*Theme: Relationship Building*

Coded Sub Theme	Interviews Coded	Artifacts Coded	Interview Frequency	Artifact Frequency	Total Frequency	Frequency Percentage
One on one relationships with staff and students	11	5	37	12	49	64.5
Intentional engagement opportunities	6	2	20	7	27	35.5

The responses to the interview questions associated with research sub question 6 centered around an organizational support: relationship building. These responses highlighted how the student affairs leaders connected relationship building as an organizational support for the embedding of the infinite mindset. The following statements from student affairs leaders indicated that establishing relationships with staff and students was crucial to the various practices of the infinite mindset. Participant 8 described how using a growth mindset can encourage more engagement within their organization:

When [directors of student success and the leadership team] are having conversations with faculty who don't have [the growth] mindset, we work on how do we have great professional development, so that they can slowly be educated in this space? We call it the coalition of the willing. We start with those who have the like mindset; who believe in this and start to build that momentum.

Participant 7 described how students serve as the key stakeholder in the work they do:

There's not a single professional staff member in our organization that is not responsible for employing students. [Working with students] organically happens. We really try to embed [practices in the] mindset, as we're all advisors. We all have some sort of student development mindset in our work.

Participant 4 described how their organization creates intentional engagement opportunities to build relationships:

I think internal team development and professional development of individuals, but team development, as well. We have dedicated resources; we have money for folks to do this, throughout the organizations, to have staff feel like this sense of support of investing in their own learning, but then investing as an organization to continue to grow and change and shift. And you know, during those retreats, we bring people in; we take people away. I think, as a state institution, people could question like, why are you taking your staff to dinner to do this on a two day retreat? We constantly have to defend those kinds of things. But if you don't invest, then your organization's not going to see that you have these opportunities to be able to stop and pause. And ask, why do we do this? Or why don't we do this or what is shifting? Really going to Simon Sinek's core principle of understanding the why to then be able to move forward. So, I would say, that is the primary way of providing people opportunities: sit on committees to be engaged in, professional organizations, to take on new challenges, even in the workplace, I think that, that is also embedded and has to be prioritized.

Participant 12 discussed a challenge in higher education and the need to create meaningful relationships among staff members:



I think this is one of the biggest challenges in higher education now. I think remote work is wonderful. I love being remote and doing those kinds of things. But, when you're not there all the time or enough, it's hard for the staff to feel connected or valued by you. I think that making sure we are there and allowing opportunities for remote work, we should allow opportunities for folks to engage with the staff and connect and be present; just make that space for them.

The four participants quoted made direct references to how relationship building supports the embedding of the infinite mindset. There was consistency among the participants regarding the role of relationship building among staff members and students. The artifacts analyzed in connection to the relationship building theme included department reports.

### ***Transferable Skills and Collaboration***

The theme with the second highest frequency associated with organizational supports and barriers was transferable skills and collaboration. The entries for the transferable skills and collaboration theme included 48 interview frequencies and 15 artifact frequencies, totaling 63 frequencies, accounting for 28.3% of the coded data for this variable. The 63 frequencies represented 4.3% of the overall 1,479 coded entries found by the researcher. All 12 participants in this study described elements associated with this theme. The coded sub themes found within this theme are shown along with their frequencies in Table 26, including cross-campus collaborations, professional mentorship, and identifying common skill sets amongst staff.

**Table 26***Theme: Transferable Skills and Collaboration*

Coded Sub Theme	Interviews Coded	Artifacts Coded	Interview Frequency	Artifact Frequency	Total Frequency	Frequency Percentage
Cross-campus collaborations	12	2	24	5	29	46.0
Professional mentorship	7	0	13	0	13	20.6
Identifying common skill sets amongst staff	5	3	11	10	21	33.3

The responses to the interview questions associated with research sub question 6 centered around organizational support: transferable skills and collaboration. These responses highlighted how the student affairs leaders connected using transferable skills across campus and establishing collaborations with different departments as organizational supports for embedding the infinite mindset. The following statements from student affairs leaders indicated that taking part in collaborative projects and using common sets of skills as student affairs professionals were crucial to the various practices of the infinite mindset. Participant 5 described the ability to be authentic in their work to foster a collaborative work environment:

I genuinely believe it happens when folks can look at the leadership team, and then see folks who are supporting them in them being autonomous; who are supporting them in really taking care of business and taking care of themselves. And with that, they really get inspired and just feel like they can just bring the

authentic self to work, and then just engage in that way across campus and overall in the culture of our department.

Participant 11 further discussed how influential departments and organizations can be by allowing collaboration to take place:

What has always been really interesting about my career in universities is that it has been extremely people driven, but not all universities are like that. You have people who can influence others in very strategic ways. There is an appeal from someone who is respected and influential on campus. You can have rapport with that person and personal appeal can be even more effective than a dataset...I think that there's just a level of respect and collaboration across campus.

Participant 6 described the process of implementing something new or a new initiative within an environment that is supportive:

I'm like, "I want to do this." Their response was, "Let's do it." It kind of shocked me because I thought that they were going to push back and ask more questions. They trusted me and wanted me to go ahead even though I just started. It seems that they're very willing to allow me to innovate and be more efficient and show them new ways of operating.

Participant 9 described utilizing and support skill sets across different organizations at the same institution:

It's easier to come together where vision and values are aligned at a mission-based institution, so people are attracted to that. I think the way the organization is structured, it creates a flat organization that tends to support staff members across units and functional areas. Because we are tuition-dependent institution, we have

to remain responsive to our students and to the campus climate. The skills across our units and departments are applicable to our student-facing initiatives and programs.

The four participants quoted made direct references to how transferable skills and the collaborative nature of the field of student affairs support the embedding of the infinite mindset. There was consistency among the participants regarding the effectiveness of collaborations across campus in supporting students. The artifacts analyzed in connection to the transferable skills and collaboration theme included department reports.

***Lack of Resources***

The theme with the third highest frequency associated with organizational supports and barriers was lack of resources. The entries for the lack of resources theme included 43 interview frequencies and 0 artifact frequencies, totaling 43 frequencies, accounting for 19.3% of the coded data for this variable. The 43 frequencies represented 2.9% of the overall 1,479 coded entries found by the researcher. All 12 participants in this study described elements associated with this theme. The coded sub themes found within this theme are shown along with their frequencies in Table 27, including financial, time, and human resources and institutional policies.

**Table 27**

*Theme: Lack of Resources*

Coded Sub Theme	Interviews Coded	Artifacts Coded	Interview Frequency	Artifact Frequency	Total Frequency	Frequency Percentage
Financial, time, and human resources	10	0	29	0	29	67.4
Institutional policies	7	0	14	0	14	32.6

The responses to the interview questions associated with research sub question 6 centered around an organizational barrier: lack of resources. These responses highlighted how the student affairs leaders perceived the lack of financial, human, and time resources as organizational barriers to embedding the infinite mindset. The following statements from student affairs leaders indicated that the lack of resources limits the extent to which the practices of the infinite mindset can be embodied. Participant 2 described the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on staffing:

We've gone through enormous transitions in leadership. And so, there's often a disconnect between the staff and what is a priority? And how does it kind of marry up?

Participant 3 further described how current staffing can only support what currently exists in their work:

I think the big ones we're seeing in this work and employment trends, especially in higher education and student affairs, are limits with, budget with time and with human resources. Even when a department is fully staffed to do things that we're doing, we're working at capacity. And so, we were finding that more and more, it's really essential to come back to prioritize what we're doing. What are the most important things we're doing? How well are we doing those most important things, and then the room that's leftover is the room for the other things that are important, but less than, the things that we decide are the most important priorities for our department.

Participant 11 described the budget limitations that their organization and institution has:

There's not a lot of budget to hire tons of staff to do things that you might actually need four or five people to do it at another university. We have the budget to hire one person. So, this has to be a really efficient person. I think lean staffing can be a barrier at times where you could have all of these ideas and creativity, but you have to stay the course of maintaining the things that are currently on your plate. If you try to grow too much and stretch yourself too thin, then there's that risk of burnout.

Participant 5 described how institution policies could serve as a limitation in terms of which what is allotted to their specific organization:

I think the major barrier would be rigidity. I'm well aware that there are still supervisors or folks who might be a lot more rigid than others, or who might think that we need to operate within a more rigid framework as inferred by university policies and rules. Which may discourage folks to feel like we are really embedding infinite mindset practices within our department.

The four participants quoted made direct references to how the lack of various kinds of resources hinder the embedding of the infinite mindset. There was consistency among the participants regarding how departments and organizations are mostly operating at capacity with their day-to-day operations.

### ***Resistance to Change***

The theme with the fourth highest frequency associated with organizational supports and barriers was resistance to change. The entries for the resistance to change theme included 41 interview frequencies and 0 artifact frequencies, totaling 41 frequencies, accounting for 18.4% of the coded data for this variable. The 41 frequencies

represented 2.8% of the overall 1,479 coded entries found by the researcher. All 12 participants in this study described elements associated with this theme. The coded sub themes found within this theme are shown along with their frequencies in Table 28, including trends in higher education, student feedback, and staff feedback.

**Table 28**

*Theme: Resistance to Change*

Coded Sub Theme	Interviews Coded	Artifacts Coded	Interview Frequency	Artifact Frequency	Total Frequency	Frequency Percentage
Trends in higher education	9	0	20	0	20	48.8
Student feedback	8	0	15	0	15	36.6
Staff feedback	4	0	6	0	6	14.6

The responses to the interview questions associated with research sub question 6 centered around an organizational barrier: resistance to change. These responses highlighted how the student affairs leaders perceived the resistance to change in the form of external factors like trends among institutions of higher education and feedback from students and staff as organizational barriers to embedding the infinite mindset. The following statements from student affairs leaders indicated that the resistance to change limits the extent to which the practices of the infinite mindset can be embodied. Participant 10 discussed the potential barrier of technology and changes in higher education:

Barriers are mostly in the resource category...amongst staffing and budgeting for technology. We have to get a whole university to approve a new technology.

What we need in our office is going to be different than other offices... We have to help [our organizations] realize what we do, how we do it, and why we do it that way. We have to constantly reassess and retool what we do because of a variety of factors out of our control.

Participant 7 described the impact of politics and external factors:

I think being in higher education; it's one of the most politically driven, politically-charged environments. It's the culture of participatory governance. What faculty believe versus what students believe and what staff believe. You need to know how to create trust and accountability amongst all of these stakeholders.

Participant 4 described how student feedback can be extensive and there is a certain capacity to any organization in higher education:

I think that the work of the work is enormous. We continue to have resource challenges in different areas. So, you got people spread thin and the demands of our job and demands of our primary constituents, our students, are never ending. And that puts a barrier to really engage at different times. And so, if it doesn't become part of the fabric of your work, you will just be swelled up with the demands of the day to day. I think that's the biggest obstacle and then we're working within bureaucratic systems, which can slow it down.

Participant 10 described how their organization can view themselves as the competitor to better support their students each year:

You need to collaborate, to trust, to have safe spaces, and to respect the opinions and ideas of everybody. And I think that works. One of the problems I had when I



read the Sinek model is it talked about competition. The only people we're really competing against is ourselves.

The four participants quoted made direct references to how the resistance to change hinders the embedding of the infinite mindset. There was consistency among the participants regarding how internal and external pressures can hinder the embedding of the infinite mindset.

### **Summary**

The 12 participants in the study met the exemplary requirements and were identified by an expert panel. Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews and artifacts related to the research questions of this study. After analyzing the data, all 12, or 100%, of the participants indicated how their organizations embed each of the five practices of the infinite mindset in some capacity.

The practice that the exemplary student affairs leaders in this study referenced the most was advancing a just cause. The 388 coded frequencies were identified from the 12 interview participants and six unique artifacts, with 346 and 42 frequencies respectively. The second most referenced practice was building trusting teams, with 271 coded frequencies among 12 interview participants and four unique artifacts, with 240 and 31 frequencies, respectively. The third most referenced practice was study your worthy rival, with 209 coded frequencies among 12 interview participants and two unique artifacts, with 184 and 25 frequencies, respectively. The second least referenced practice was preparing for existential flexibility, with 204 coded frequencies among 12 interview participants and five unique artifacts, with 174 and 30 frequencies, respectively. The least referenced practice was demonstrating the courage to lead, with 184 coded frequencies

among 12 interview participants and four unique artifacts, with 163 and 21 frequencies, respectively. Table 29 provides an overview of the frequencies from interviews and artifacts across the 19 major themes of the study along with their associated research variable organized from most to least frequencies.

**Table 29**

*Overview of Frequencies for Major Themes*

Major Theme	Infinite Mindset Variable	Total Frequency (Interviews & Artifacts)
Mission, Vision, and Values	Just Cause	158
Student-Centered Alignment	Just Cause	134
Establishing and Building Relationships	Trusting Teams	126
Cross-Campus and Cross-Functional Areas	Worthy Rival	109
Top-Down and Cascading Perspective	Just Cause	96
Communication	Trusting Teams	94
Student Feedback	Existential Flexibility	87
Modeling and Mentoring	Courage to Lead	76
Relationship Building	Supports & Barriers	76
Needs Assessment	Existential Flexibility	64
Transferable Skills and Collaboration	Supports & Barriers	63
Cross-Institutions	Worthy Rival	60
Transparency	Courage to Lead	58
Strategic Thinking	Existential Flexibility	53
Accessibility of the Leader	Trusting Teams	51
Awareness of Values and Goals	Courage to Lead	50
Lack of Resources	Supports & Barriers	43
Resistance to Change	Supports & Barriers	41
Mentorship	Worthy Rival	40
Total:		1479

When analyzing the research variables through the major themes, the most referenced theme was mission, vision, and values and their connection to advancing the

just cause. This theme had 158 total frequencies with 134 frequencies from 12 interview participants and 24 frequencies from five unique artifacts. This accounted for 10.7% of the 1,479 total coded frequencies of the study. The second most referenced theme was student-centered alignment and its connection to advancing the just cause with a total of 134 total frequencies, which is the sum of 116 frequencies from 12 interview participants and 18 frequencies from six unique artifacts. This accounted for 9.1% of the 1,479 total coded frequencies of the study.

The second least referenced theme was resistance to change as a barrier to the embedding of an infinite mindset, with 41 total frequencies, which came from all 12 interview participants. This accounted for 2.8% of the 1,479 total coded frequencies of the study. The least referenced theme was mentorship in connection to the practice of studying your worthy rival, with 40 total frequencies, which came from all 12 interview participants. This accounted for 2.7% of the 1,479 total coded frequencies of the study.

From the 12 interviews and the six unique artifacts, there were 47 sub themes or considerations emerged. These 47 sub themes included the perceived supports and barriers to the embedding of an infinite mindset. Table 30 provides an overview of the 47 sub themes and their frequencies organized from most to least referenced.

**Table 30***Overview of Sub Themes or Considerations*

Sub Theme or Consideration	Total Frequency (Interviews & Artifacts)
Physical signage and displays	95
Routine team or organization meetings	70
Staff needs	65
Establishing and developing acronyms	63
University strategic plans	58
Best practices working with students	55
Student needs	54
One on one relationships with staff and students	49
Obtaining student perspectives	47
Openness to students' perspectives	39
Evaluating institutional/division strategic plan	39
Connecting with others	39
Staff and administration vision	38
Intentional staff engagement	38
Visualizing how initiatives can be used internally	37
Communication from administration	36
Student-centered approaches	35
Campus culture	33
Starting each academic year with a fresh perspective	31
Evaluating current programs and initiatives	31
Public university systems	29
Cross-campus collaborations	29
Financial, time, and human resources	29
Engagement with other departments	28
Institutionalized mentorship program	28
One on one interactions and meetings	27
Intentional engagement opportunities	27
Central campus needs	26
Supervisor feedback	24
Onboarding	23
Identifying areas of need	23
Direct communication to students	22
Professional associations	21
Identifying common skill sets amongst staff	21
Trends in higher education	20
Focus on student needs	17
Routine gauges on staff	15
Alignment of staff and students	15
Student feedback	15
Perspectives on staff professional development	14
Institutional policies	14
Professional mentorship	13
Professional development relationships	12
Neighboring institutions	10
Taking action and adapting to needs	10
Openness to students	9
Staff feedback	6

Some of the sub themes or considerations overlapped across different research questions, but were kept separate due to how the sub theme was oriented during the coding process. For example, one on one relationships with staff and students as a sub theme of relationship building a support to the embedding of an infinite mindset has a different orientation to the concept of the relationship than professional development relationships as a sub theme of mentorship with respect to the practice of studying your worthy rival. Upon reviewing the 19 major themes that emerged from the data (as outlined in Table 29), nine key findings, each constituting 5% or more of the total frequency (75 or more frequencies each), were identified across the six research questions. Table 31 provides an overview of the nine key findings along with their frequencies.

**Table 31**

*Key Findings*

Key Finding	Total Frequency (Interviews & Artifacts)
Mission, Vision, and Values	158
Student-Centered Alignment	134
Establishing and Building Relationships	126
Cross-Campus and Cross-Functional Areas	109
Top-Down and Cascading Perspective	96
Communication	94
Student Feedback	87
Modeling and Mentoring	76
Relationship Building	76

This chapter provided a review of the study’s purpose, research questions, methodology, data collection and analysis process, population, sample, and overview and description of the data collected. The overview of the data was presented with the findings from the 12 semi-structured interviews conducted with exemplary student affairs

leaders and the six collected artifacts. The data analysis was guided by the central research question and the six research sub questions, related to the embedding of Sinek's (2019) infinite mindset and its practices: advancing a just cause, building trusting teams, studying your worthy rival, preparing for existential flexibility, and demonstrating the courage to lead.

Chapter IV addressed how the data and findings connected to these research questions to highlight themes that emerged across the study. The 12 exemplary student affairs leaders perceived the practices of Sinek's (2019) infinite mindset as embedded into their organizations to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results. Chapter V will provide a comprehensive summary of the major findings of the study, discuss unexpected findings, derive conclusions based on the major findings, offer implications for future actions, and suggest recommendations for future studies. Chapter V will conclude with reflections and closing remarks.

## CHAPTER V: FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### **Overview**

This phenomenological qualitative study was conducted to explore and describe how exemplary student affairs leaders perceive the practices of Simon Sinek's (2019) infinite mindset framework are embedded within their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results. Additionally, this study intended to understand the organizational supports and barriers that exemplary student affairs leaders perceive affect the development of the infinite mindset within their organization. This study was part of a thematic study conducted by eight doctoral students as peer researchers, supported by four faculty advisors.

The data collected from the 12 interviews and six artifacts were summarized in Chapter IV. Chapter V begins with a restatement of the purpose statement, research questions, research methodology, data collection, population, and sample of the study. Chapter V also includes the presentation of major findings, unexpected findings, conclusions, implications for action, and recommendations for future research. Chapter V closes with concluding remarks and reflections.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore and describe how exemplary leaders in the field of student affairs perceive the practices of Simon Sinek's (2019) Infinite Mindset Framework are embedded within their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results. A further purpose of this study was to understand the organizational supports and barriers these exemplary leaders perceive affect the development of an infinite mindset.

## **Central Research Question**

How do successful leaders perceive the practices of an infinite mindset are embedded within their organization to achieve extraordinary results?

### **Research Sub Questions**

1. How do exemplary student affairs leaders perceive the practice of Advance a Just Cause is embedded within their organization to inspire achievement of extraordinary results?
2. How do exemplary student affairs leaders perceive the practice of Build Trusting Teams is embedded within their organization to inspire achievement of extraordinary results?
3. How do exemplary student affairs leaders perceive the practice of Study Your Worthy Rival is embedded within their organization to inspire achievement of extraordinary results?
4. How do exemplary student affairs leaders perceive the practice of Preparing for Existential Flexibility is embedded within their organization to inspire achievement of extraordinary results?
5. How do exemplary student affairs leaders perceive the practice of Demonstrating the Courage to Lead is embedded within their organization to inspire achievement of extraordinary results?
6. What supports and barriers do exemplary leaders perceive affect the embedding of infinite mindset practices within their organization?



## **Research Methods and Data Collection Procedures**

A research design refers to the overarching approach in addressing a study's research purpose and questions that allows the researcher to develop a process to collect and analyze data. The research design can be mixed methods, qualitative, or quantitative. In order to understand how exemplary student affairs leaders perceive the practices of the Infinite Mindset are embedded in their organizations, a qualitative research design was chosen as the best fit for this study. A qualitative research design refers to the collection of data that can be interpreted and analyzed using words with an emphasis on interviews, observations, and artifacts (Patten & Newhart, 2018).

Exploring the lived experiences and perceptions of leaders within organizations requires the researcher to inquire about different aspects of the study's research purpose statement and its subsequent research questions. Utilizing narratives and words collected from a group of individuals, qualitative research aims to culminate themes and findings that align with a study's overarching purpose (Patten & Newhart, 2018). In order to understand how leaders perceive how Sinek's (2019) Infinite Mindset and its five practices are embedded in their organization in creating extraordinary results, the peer researchers determined that this study's qualitative research design should adopt a phenomenological approach in order to explore the lived experiences and perspectives of exemplary student affairs leaders. Utilizing the phenomenological approach allows the researcher to understand the lived experiences and perceptions related to a given phenomenon, such as achieving extraordinary results through the embedded practices of the Infinite Mindset (Patton, 2015). Other forms of qualitative inquiry include

ethnography, grounded theory, and narrative inquiry, all of which take on different perspectives and foci to address the study's research purpose (Patton, 2015).

The phenomenological approach focuses on individuals' perceptions of a shared phenomenon and explores the lived experiences of these individuals to better understand how the phenomenon influences the way in which they construct their realities (Patten & Newhart, 2018; Patton, 2015). Utilizing this approach allowed the researcher to understand the lived experiences of exemplary student affairs leaders and gather insight into their perceptions of how the practices of the Infinite Mindset are embedded into their organizations to produce extraordinary results.

Qualitative research inquiry uses narratives and words from participants to develop themes and findings that align with a study's research purpose (Patten & Newhart, 2018). Collecting responses directly from participants and from artifacts that they submit contribute to the study's overall data collection methodology. The researcher conducted 12 virtual interviews via Zoom and utilized a shared interview protocol and script developed by a team of peer researchers and faculty members. The interviews were conducted following approval from the University of Massachusetts Global Institutional Review Board (IRB). Alongside the interviews, the researcher asked for relevant artifacts from the 12 selected participants from the research study. The data was collected from 12 exemplary student affairs leaders in the form of interview transcripts and artifacts. Additional information was collected in the form of feedback and clarifications from participants after they reviewed their respective interview transcripts. Using NVivo, the researcher methodologically coded and organized findings from the interview transcripts and artifacts.

## **Population**

A population is defined as a group of individuals, objects, or events that share a set of criteria or traits that allows researchers to generalize the results of a study (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). For this study, the population includes student affairs leaders at four-year institutions of higher education in California. In the 2020-2021 academic year, California had 737 active institutions of higher education, spanning across both public and private institutions, with only 296 categorized as four-year institutions (UnivStats, n.d.). Pritchard and McChesney (2018) indicated that there are typically one to seven professionals in student affairs leadership positions from top officers to department heads overseeing more than one program area, which depends on program availability at each campus. Applying this range of student affairs leaders (one to seven) to the 296 four-year institutions yields a range of 296 to 2,072. Due to the limited number of leadership roles at each institution, the population focused on both private and public institutions, because campus climates and challenges oftentimes affect multiple institutions to similar extents particularly with institutions in California (Public Policy Institute of California, 2019).

## **Sample**

A sample is defined as a subgroup of a population that allows the researcher to study a representative group of individuals to explore findings that could be generalized to the larger population (Patten & Newhart, 2018). The researcher used convenience sampling to identify the individuals participating in this study because it considered the population's accessibility and expedience. Convenience sampling is the method of collecting data and responses from a pool of respondents that is convenient and

accessible for the researchers (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). Additionally, the researcher used purposive sampling to ensure that the data that was gathered for the study consisted of robust lived experiences that could align with the study's purpose statement and research questions (Patton, 2015). Purposive sampling is the selection of individuals for the study who would provide perspectives and insights to the topic given that they meet a set of criteria (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). The peer researchers used purposive criterion sampling, which adds a set of predetermined criteria that participants need to meet (Patton, 2015). Utilizing specific criteria that the participants need to meet allows for a more in-depth analysis of lived experiences among participants with shared characteristics and professional experiences, because the peer researchers work in different fields and have different specializations.

This study focused on exemplary student affairs leaders using established criteria created and agreed upon by the thematic team and faculty advisors. For a phenomenological study, Creswell and Creswell (2018) recommend a sample of six to 25 participants. Due to the limited number of leadership roles at each institution, the researcher identified 12 exemplary student affairs leaders for a representative sample across the nine institutions in this research study as nominated by members of an expert panel.

The team of peer researchers developed a shared list of criteria to identify exemplary leaders for the purposes of this study. An exemplary student affairs leader in this study is a leader who demonstrates extraordinary results and evidence of leading their organization to continually learn and grow to achieve profound results that extend

into the future without limits, with a minimum of five years of experience in the profession and meeting at least three of the following criteria:

1. The exemplary student affairs leader demonstrates evidence of collaboratively leading an organization fostering creativity and future-orientation improvements.
2. The exemplary student affairs leader actively participates in community leadership and shared problem-solving activities.
3. The exemplary student affairs leader has had articles, papers, or materials written, published, or presented at conferences or association meetings on leadership.
4. The exemplary student affairs leader has received recognition by his or her peers as a leader who gives respect to all people.
5. The exemplary student affairs leader is a member in good standing in professional associations in his or her field.

### **Major Findings**

In this phenomenological qualitative study, data from interviews and artifacts were analyzed and used to determine major findings. Based on the responses and collected artifacts from the 12 exemplary student affairs leaders, 19 major themes emerged from the data, with 47 sub themes that were identified among the participants in the study. The researcher used 75 total frequencies as the threshold for the major findings to identify the major findings of the study. This resulted in identifying nine major findings of the study that span across the six research sub questions of the study and the research variables: advancing a just cause, building trusting teams, studying your worthy rival, preparing for existential flexibility, demonstrating the courage to lead, and identifying the organizational supports and barriers to embedding the infinite mindset.

### **Major Finding 1: Exemplary Student Affairs Leaders Use Mission, Vision, and Values to Bring Together Stakeholders at Their Institutions**

The exemplary student affairs leaders in this study described the importance of the organization's mission, vision, and values to bring a sense of unity among the students, staff, and faculty members at their institutions. Long (2012) described how leaders and practitioners in the field of student affairs identify with the common mission of understanding and supporting student needs. By organizing around this common mission, all of the stakeholders of the institution are able to find similar perspectives on what the just cause means for the programs, departments, and initiatives that the field of student affairs encapsulates.

All 12 of the participants, or 100%, made references to the importance of the mission, vision, and values to the practice of advancing the just cause for their respective organizations. This theme had 158 frequencies or 10.7% of the overall total frequencies collected for this study. The student affairs leaders discussed the use of signage at facilities and entrances that explicitly stated institutional values and sets of acronyms used by staff members and students to coalesce around a common vision for their campus.

### **Major Finding 2: Exemplary Student Affairs Leaders Use the Student-Centered Approach in their Work through Feedback and Evaluation**

The exemplary student affairs leaders in this study consistently described their student-centered perspectives and approaches to the work they do within their departments and organizations. Sandeen (1991) described how student affairs practitioners must create and develop these student support programs with feedback from

students themselves. By focusing on the students, their needs, and their experiences, student affairs leaders are able to guide their departments and organizations toward providing robust and supportive programs for the students at their respective institutions.

All 12 of the participants, or 100%, made references to the importance of student-centered alignment to the practice of advancing the just cause for their respective organizations. This theme had 134 frequencies or 9.1% of the overall total frequencies collected for this study. The participants in the study discussed how the students at their institutions served as the focal point for the work they do and the programs that they support. They consider student needs and ask for student feedback on how their departments and organizations are supporting them.

**Major Finding 3: Exemplary Student Affairs Leaders Use their Institutions' Culture at the Top to Guide their Organizations to Find Intention and Meaning**

The exemplary student affairs leaders in this study described how leadership and management administrators at their respective institutions can influence the work their departments or organizations are committed to. Knox (2022) described a situation where university administrators needed to make a statement and take a stance on a campus issue as it related to students, which resulted in showing a supportive and student-centered perspective for those involved. This showed the campus stakeholders what values and goals to which campus administrators and the student affairs leaders are committed.

All 12 of the participants, or 100%, made references to the importance of the top-down and cascading perspective to the practice of advancing the just cause for their respective organizations. This theme had 96 frequencies or 6.5% of the overall total frequencies collected for this study. The participants in the study described how values

among the institutions' presidents, chancellors, and other high-level leaders can be embodied or incorporated into the work done at the departmental or unit-level for student support services.

#### **Major Finding 4: Exemplary Student Affairs Leaders Implement the Building of Trusting Teams by Focusing on Relationships with Staff**

The exemplary student affairs leaders described the importance of one-on-one relationship building and creating spaces for relationship building among their staff members and students. Establishing trust among members of the organization initiates the process of developing a supportive environment for students, just as these student affairs leaders can model vulnerability for their staff members (Long, 2012; Lencioni, 2006). By establishing and fostering trust within their organizations, the student affairs leaders are creating supportive spaces where staff members and students can be comfortable and more willing to be their authentic selves.

All 12 of the participants, or 100%, made references to the importance of establishing and building relationships to the practice of building trusting teams for their respective organizations. This theme had 126 frequencies or 8.5% of the overall total frequencies collected for this study. The participants in this study consistently mentioned how relationships served as the foundation through which staff members within their respective organizations feel like further committed to the organization.

#### **Major Finding 5: Exemplary Student Affairs Leaders Focus on Consistent Communication and Feedback with Their Stakeholders**

The exemplary student affairs leaders in this study described the importance of communication and considering feedback from their stakeholders to the practice of



building trusting teams. Going beyond being able to be their authentic selves in the work through the supportive environments built around one-on-one relationships, student affairs leaders and their organizations must embody vulnerability in order to cultivate open communication and be willing to listen to and consider feedback from stakeholders (Lencioni, 2006). By having open communication with stakeholders at their institution and in their department or organization, the student affairs leader is moving toward greater understanding of how students' needs and the institution's goals can be met.

All 12 of the participants, or 100%, made references to the importance of communication to the practice of building trusting teams for their respective organizations. This theme had 94 frequencies or 6.4% of the overall total frequencies collected for this study. The participants in the study discussed how communication and feedback helps facilitate a psychologically safe space for staff members and, by extension, for students that engage with their respective departments.

### **Major Finding 6: Exemplary Student Affairs Leaders Collaborate Across Different Departments at Their Institutions to Better Understand and Serve Student Needs**

The exemplary student affairs leaders described the process of collaboration across different units and departments at their respective institutions. Schroeder (2022) noted that the field of higher education is facing the need for a more personalized approach to working with students. By understanding what practices and programs are successful in working with students across different programs and departments at the same institutions, these exemplary student affairs leaders are encouraging their teams to implement and build upon their current approaches in working with students on campus.

All 12 of the participants, or 100%, made references to the importance of cross-campus and cross-functional areas to the practice of studying your worthy rival for their respective organizations. This theme had 109 frequencies or 7.4% of the overall total frequencies collected for this study. By understanding what other units or teams across campus are doing to support students, the participants and their organizations are learning and implementing best practices in working with the student communities unique to their campus.

**Major Finding 7: Exemplary Student Affairs Leaders Use Student Feedback to Better Support Future Generations of Students**

The exemplary student affairs leaders in this study described how it was imperative to consider the student trends and needs that change over time and how their organizations need to adapt or pivot accordingly. Mintz (2022) noted that students coming into higher education are needing more specialized or focused support, especially with the changing needs for industries that students will be entering into after graduation. The participants in the study indicated how their departments' programs and initiatives are driven by the feedback that students provide. The way their departments operate could shift or change during the academic year or at the start of the new year with new students.

All 12 of the participants, or 100%, made references to the importance of student feedback to the practice of preparing for existential flexibility for their respective organizations. This theme had 87 frequencies or 5.9% of the overall total frequencies collected for this study. The participants in this study described how their organizations used assessments and evaluations to understand how their current students are supported

by their programs and initiatives in order to inform how they can improve future services and events.

**Major Finding 8: Exemplary Student Affairs Leaders Expect Members of Their Organization to Create Robust Experiences and Spaces for Students through Modeling and Mentoring**

The exemplary student affairs leaders in this study described how the members within their organizations or departments are either given the agency to lead or engage directly with campus leaders on projects and initiatives to understand how decisions are made and how actions are taken at the university level. In understanding the orientation and perspectives of university or campus leaders, the exemplary student affairs leaders of this study and the members of the organizations they lead go through the process of modeling self-awareness and self-regulation in order to create robust experiences and spaces for their students (Gardner et al., 2005; Long, 2012; Mintz, 2022). The members of the organizations or departments that the participants lead are given opportunities to grow and develop within spaces where they can explore leadership roles and responsibilities.

All 12 of the participants, or 100%, made references to the importance of modeling and mentoring to the practice of demonstrating the courage to lead for their respective organizations. This theme had 76 frequencies or 5.1% of the overall total frequencies collected for this study. The participants described how fostering spaces where members of their organizations should take leadership responsibilities allowed the organization to adapt and shift to the student needs more easily.

### **Major Finding 9: Exemplary Student Affairs Leaders Perceive that Relationships with Students and Staff Members Serve as the Foundation to Sustained Success in their Programs**

The exemplary student affairs leaders in this study described how engagement among leaders, staff members, and students on campus supported their organizations' sustained success in working with students. Although higher education serves the purpose of developing students for public service and success in the professional workplace, student affairs leaders are met with competing priorities to meet both student needs and the goals of their institution (Chan, 2016; Long, 2012). By creating opportunities for relationship building among the stakeholders of the student experience at their institution, the exemplary student affairs leader is able to better understand how to meet student needs.

All 12 of the participants, or 100%, made references to relationship building as the primary support for embedding the practices of the infinite mindset for their respective organizations. This theme had 76 frequencies or 5.1% of the overall total frequencies collected for this study. The sub themes included within relationship building were the one-on-one relationships with staff members and students and providing intentional engagement opportunities for members of the organization.

### **Unexpected Findings**

There were two unexpected findings from this research study. The first unexpected finding was that the major trend in higher education mentioned across all of the interview participants was the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the return to in-person operations and changes in how services are offered to students. The second

unexpected finding was the low amount of consensus around perceived barriers to the embedding of an infinite mindset.

### **Unexpected Finding 1: Lack of Addressing Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion as a Major Trend in Higher Education**

The literature indicates that the field of student affairs and higher education has to address trends and political pressures oftentimes related to diversity, equity, and inclusion, specifically at the departmental or functional area-level (Long, 2012; Stewart-Tillman & Joyce, 2017). When prompted with interview questions related to taking the same path or feeling pressured to take a different path, only two of the 12 participants mentioned trends and pressures related to diversity, equity, and inclusion. In contrast, all 12 participants described the impacts of and the changes that have come about within their departments due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Unexpected Finding 2: Low Frequencies of Perceived Barriers to Embedding an Infinite Mindset**

The coded frequencies for the two sub themes as perceived organizational barrier, lack of resources and resistance to change, were the third and second least referenced sub themes of the study, with 43 and 41 frequencies, respectively. Most of participants referred back to perceived supports to embedding an infinite mindset as a way to overcome potential challenges. The lack or deficit of resources whether in finances, time, or staffing was referenced by each of the 12 participants. The participants of the study spoke about how they needed to pivot or adapt to the many challenging circumstances during their time as a leader in their respective departments and organizations. For this study, it was unexpected how few statements and responses were focused on how these

challenging circumstances served as barriers or negative factors to embedding an infinite mindset within their organizations; rather, they were perceived as opportunities for growth.

### **Unexpected Finding 3: Understanding and Working in the Political Landscape of the Institution**

Student affairs leaders are tasked to change and adapt to the trends in higher education policy and diverse student needs as colleges and universities face growing political and financial pressures (Harper, 2004; Long, 2012). The participants of the study discussed the process of developing their organizations in a way that aligns with the culture of their respective institutions and that addresses the student needs on their campuses. The political nature of the work done at the organization or department level needs to be done with intention and commitment so that stakeholders at all levels of the institution are considered and integrated into the work.

### **Conclusions**

The major findings of this study were used to draw conclusions on how exemplary student affairs leaders perceive the practices of Sinek's (2019) infinite mindset framework, including advance a just cause, build trusting teams, study your worthy rival, preparing for existential flexibility, and demonstrating the courage to lead and how they are embedded in their respective organizations to inspire the achievements of extraordinary results. These conclusions also focused on the organizational supports and barriers these exemplary student affairs leaders perceive affect the development of an infinite mindset. The following conclusions were drawn from the literature, the interviews with the 12 exemplary student affairs leaders, and the six collected artifacts.

### **Conclusion 1: Alignment of the Work to Being Student-Centered**

Based on the findings of this study and the review of the literature, it is concluded that exemplary student affairs leaders orient their organizations or departments to be student-centered in order to bring together stakeholders to achieve extraordinary results. This practice can be seen through the examples of considering what currently works in their offices in supporting students on campus and the onboarding and interview processes of considering whether or not candidates can connect and relate to students at their campuses. These exemplary student affairs leaders encourage members of their organization and the students involved with their department to provide feedback and insight into how they can achieve the idealized future state of supporting all students at their campus.

This conclusion is supported by all 12, or 100%, of the participants in this study and five, or 83.3%, of the artifacts collected in this study. Each of the participants consistently connected experiences as student affairs leaders and the work that their organizations do back to what students need and want out of their offices. Long (2012) broadly described how professionals in the field of student affairs should consider the needs, motivations, and desires of students in order to build and develop robust student support programs. By maintaining a student-centered perspective in their work, student affairs leaders guide their organizations and their staff members toward the idealized future state.

### **Conclusion 2: Relationships as the Foundation to the Work**

Based on the findings of this study and the review of the literature, it is concluded that exemplary student affairs leaders who are people- and relationship-driven develop

robust student support or student affairs programs that continue to meet student needs. By establishing intentional mentorship relationships or creating spaces where staff members are comfortable and feel psychologically safe enough to engage with one another or with the leader themselves, these exemplary student affairs leaders are cognizant of how effective members of their organization can be by bringing their authentic selves into the work they do with students. As student affairs leaders are creating and developing spaces where members of their organization can be vulnerable, these members are then creating spaces where students can also be vulnerable (Lencioni, 2006; Long, 2012).

This conclusion is supported by all 12, or 100%, of the participants in this study and four, or 66.7%, of the artifacts collected in this study. Examples of responses by the participants in the study on the relationships that leaders described included the awareness that members of the organization will bring their lived experiences, emotions, and feelings into their work and the importance of listening to one another. By building relationships with others, the student affairs leader is able to better understand the needs of members of their organization and the students who engage with their programs and initiatives.

### **Conclusion 3: Bringing Together Diverse Experiences & Skills**

Based on the findings of this study and the review of the literature, it is concluded that exemplary student affairs leaders who perceive their organizations as operational units consisting of diverse experiences and skills rather than just a singular department with a focused mission can effectively guide their organizations to collaborate with organizations at their institutions or with similar organizations at different institutions. By bringing together different perspectives on different trends in student needs on their



campus, the institution can develop more robust ways to support students as their needs diversify. Schroeder (2022) highlighted how changes in higher education are slow moving compared to the rapid developments of the diverse student population. These student affairs leaders are challenging this slow movement by taking a proactive approach in further understanding student needs across different functional areas and institutions.

This conclusion is supported by all 12, or 100%, of the participants in this study and two, or 33.3%, of the artifacts collected in this study. The student affairs leaders in this study consistently reiterated the learning process of new strategies and processes that support the different student communities at their campuses. For example, strategies on supporting the growing number of transfer students at their institutions were shared by student affairs leaders from an orientations program, residential education, and student engagement programs.

#### **Conclusion 4: Pivoting & Adapting in Response to Evaluation**

Based on the findings of this study and the review of the literature, it is concluded that exemplary student affairs leaders who engage in routine evaluation and assessment processes ensure that the services and programs their organizations provide are continuously adapting to meet student needs. These student affairs leaders consider the financial and human resources from an administrative perspective as they engage in further investigation into how effective their programs are. However, this understanding of effectiveness is further complicated by what Schroeder (2022) noted as a need to provide more personalized learning and support for students in higher education. Therefore, the exemplary student affairs leader considers what changes can be made in

response to the results found in the evaluations and assessments to bring about sustainable results in the face of the changing student needs.

This conclusion is supported by all 12, or 100%, of the participants in this study and five, or 83.3%, of the artifacts collected in this study. In order to prepare for existential flexibility, the exemplary student affairs leader must balance their administrative duties of abiding by campus policy and managing resources, while maintaining the student-centered approach. Participant responses noted how integral routine evaluations for their programs across a single academic year conferred greater mobility for their organization to address challenges as they came up.

#### **Conclusion 5: Informed & Influenced by Campus Culture**

Based on the findings of this study and the review of the literature, it is concluded that exemplary student affairs leaders who consider how the campus culture influences the work their organizations do and how committed the members of their organization are to the work develop opportunities for greater support for the organization's members and students. The student affairs leader uses elements of the campus culture to further establish how elements like modeling decision-making and actions and bring transparent are embodied within the organization. The members of the organization are modeling further what the institution's campus culture embodies and, therefore, the lived experiences of the students at that specific campus are affected in a certain way (Gardner et al., 2005; Long, 2012; Mintz, 2022).

This conclusion is supported by all 12, or 100%, of the participants in this study and four, or 66.7%, of the artifacts collected in this study. The participants in this study referenced examples where opportunities to lead committees and special projects allowed

members of their organizations to participate in and experience leadership roles. Others referenced how some institutions and their campus cultures are more conservative or risk-averse, which led to less risk-taking by the organization overall.

### **Conclusion 6: Nurturing Professional Development**

Based on the findings of this study and the review of the literature, it is concluded that exemplary student affairs leaders who focus on the relationships and professional development of their staff members create more innovative and sustainable programs in their departments. The student affairs leader should be responsible for the development of their organization's members' skills and competencies for the organization's success and the student affairs practitioners' professional development (Kuk & Banning, 2009; Long, 2012). Nurturing professional development opportunities for members of the organization serves as a foundation or support to initiate the embedding of an infinite mindset for the student affairs department.

This conclusion is supported by all 12, or 100%, of the participants in this study and all six, or 100%, of the artifacts collected in this study. There was a consensus among the participants in the study about how members of their organization should be supported to continue to learn new skills, collaborate across their campus, and aspire to new roles and positions. The participants mentioned collaborative efforts across their institutions and participation in professional associations as ways to allow members of their organization to engage in professional development opportunities and further develop innovative and sustainable ways their organizations' programs and initiatives can continue to support students.

### **Implications for Action**

The implications for action in this study are based on the findings and conclusions. Student affairs leaders need to consider these implications to implement within their organizations to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results. The field of student affairs has grown to encapsulate many different aspects of a student's day-to-day life and requires critical and robust strategies to provide support for each of these factors (Marshall et al., 2016). The following implications for actions related to the five practices of Sinek's (2019) infinite mindset are presented for student affairs leaders at the departmental or organizational level, but could be expanded for management at the campus-wide level.

### **Implication 1: Formalize Relationships Among Student Services & Student Affairs Departments on Campus**

Based on the finding that exemplary student affairs leaders and their organizations align with a student-centered perspective, leaders need to formalize relationships and collaborations between different student services and student affairs departments across campus to ensure that strategies and practices in working with students can be shared. Additionally, programming efforts in providing services to students can be done in tandem, rather than operating in parallel or in adjacent spaces. Depending on the structure of the institution, student support and student affairs departments could be dedicated to specific academic schools, serve the entire campus community, or have both modalities. This approach would address deficits in financial and human resources by bringing together staff members to offer services to students in a more standardized and effective way. This would also allow for more opportunities to innovate and be creative in the way staff members can approach their work, because they would have more time to explore

different ways to support and provide services to students. These relationships across different student services and student affairs departments would also allow individual departments and their leaders to learn about the perspectives and decision-making processes based on student communities. For example, residential education could be providing physical housing communities dedicated to transfer students, whereas student governance and leadership programs are working on an initiative to provide additional programming and engagement opportunities for transfer students to network and interact with one another. Sharing best practices and ways to support students on campus from different perspectives like student affairs and academic services departments will develop more innovative and collaborative programs. These practices and ways to support can be further explored through presentations and networking with student affairs practitioners and student advisors at professional association conferences like the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) and the American College Personnel Association (ACPA).

### **Implication 2: Create Spaces for Organization Members to Interact**

Based on participant responses, spaces deemed as psychologically safe are those where members feel comfortable talking about their personal lives, can connect with others on common experiences and identities outside of the work, and be their authentic selves. Creating spaces where organization members can engage and interact with one another outside of collaborative efforts of the work itself and allotting time and space for relationship building can initiate the process of becoming vulnerable in the professional space. The student affairs leader can lead with vulnerability and bring their personal values and morals into the professional space to build trust within their organization as an

authentic leader (Gardner et al., 2005; Goleman, 1995; Lencioni, 2006). Intentionally creating these spaces could nurture the organization members' trust in the leader, the organization, and the other members within the organization. This would ultimately allow the organization members to be authentic in their work with students and other stakeholders. Student affairs leaders can work with other organization leaders across campus to bring together a budget and allot time for relationship building and networking for their organization members. For example, hosting joint department meetings or optional social outings can remove organization members from physical spaces of their work and encourage more relationship building among individuals rather than as coworkers and colleagues. Prioritizing staff development and relationship building fosters a network of individuals who are more willing and comfortable to collaborate and engage with one another. Opening these spaces for staff members to engage with one another on a more personal level will depend on departmental and unit leaders or the institution's administrators.

### **Implication 3: Leadership Opportunities for Entry- and Mid-Level Practitioners**

Based on the findings of this study, student affairs leaders must advocate for leadership opportunities for their organizations' entry- and mid-level practitioners. Although learning from other departments and other institutions can inform best practices in working with students, allowing organization members to engage in leadership opportunities allows for the learning of leadership perspectives and decision-making processes while supporting the professional development of these members. Student affairs leaders can show how they can be servant leaders for their entry- and mid-level student affairs practitioners in their organizations by supporting them in leadership

opportunities, just as the practitioners would support students in their work (Liden et al., 2008; Long, 2012; Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002; Sinek, 2019). Supporting leadership opportunities for members of the organization as a service can take the form of allowing staff members to attend and present at conferences and for professional associations, serving on board and advisory committees at the institution, and allowing staff members to lead special projects for the department or organization. For example, department leaders can create opportunities for others to lead a recruitment cycle for student resident assistants. This can be led by entry- or mid-level student affairs practitioners to learn about how to communicate as a leader over a process, plan and gather support for their process, and execute and make decisions on behalf of their committee. By allowing these practitioners to take the lead and learn from organization leaders on how to be leaders themselves, the organization works toward implementing and acting upon new perspectives and learning how to sustain success in terms of supporting the student populations at their institution.

#### **Implication 4: Standardize Evaluation and Assessment Timelines**

Based on the findings of this study, student affairs leaders need to establish a clear timeline for evaluations and assessments of learning objectives, outcomes, and goals of their organizations' programs and initiatives throughout each academic year. Because student needs change between and during academic years, semesters, and sessions, the priorities and resource uses by the organization must be managed in a way to align to the student-centered approach and the idealized future state of supporting all students. As one of the participants mentioned, the implementation of a program or initiative, especially being student-facing, should be an iterative process, including the instant feedback that

could develop the service for a student to become more robust. Depending on the structure of the programs and the organization, a general timeline for evaluations needs to include the summer session between academic years and the time between semesters, quarters, or sessions. Student affairs leaders must build their evaluation and assessment programs around best practices and established standards like NASPA professional competency areas for student affairs practitioners and the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS).

### **Implication 5: Committee Leadership and Advisory Opportunities for Organization Members**

Based on the findings from the participants in this study, student affairs leaders need to encourage the establishment of committees for projects and operations or the participation in national associations and advisory groups. Participants mentioned the use of committees to create a flattened hierarchy or a more democratic environment for their organizations. By allowing members of the organization to take on leadership or chairing roles in committees and having administrators participate in those committees, organization members are engaging in modeling strategies that allow them to demonstrate the courage to lead in the face of other members. This would provide new perspectives in the decision-making process for the organization as a whole and allow these organization members to participate in professional development opportunities. Student affairs leaders and campus administrators can encourage their organization and institution stakeholders to learn from and participate in professional associations and learning communities like the Knowledge Communities housed within NASPA, which include functional areas and identities like International Education, Gender and Sexuality,



and Student Leadership Programs. Additionally, they can be encouraged to participate in organizations like Asian Pacific Americans in Higher Education (APAHE) to further understand and learn about how their identities intersect with their work. This engagement through leadership or participation in opportunities outside the scope of the work allows for continuous learning of practices, skills, and ways to support students.

### **Implication 6: Leadership Training on Institutional Politics**

Based on the findings from the participants in this study, student affairs leaders need to understand how to work with their organizations and provide guidance under institutional politics. Rising leaders in the field of student affairs need to be trained to balance the demands of what their institutions want from their student support programs and initiatives, while still aligning with the mission of supporting the whole student. Understanding institution policies and the desires of the upper leadership and administrators at the institution allows the student affairs leader to understand what can and cannot be done at the department-level. Understanding the needs of direct reports or members of the departments the student affairs leader oversees allows them to create safe spaces for these student affairs and student support professionals to be vulnerable in communicating what values and needs they have related to the work. Lastly, understanding the students through on-the-ground communication and discussions with individual students allows the student affairs leader to become more aware of the trends in student needs with new students coming to campus each academic year and understanding how their departments can support these students during the time they spend at the institution. Learning how to navigate political spaces with competing stakeholders will allow student affairs leaders to better guide their organizations.

## **Recommendations for Further Research**

### **Recommendation 1: Student Affairs Leaders at One Institution Type**

It is recommended that this study be replicated with a focus on student affairs leaders at a single institution type. This study focused on the general geographic area of Los Angeles County, California. It would be beneficial to see the differences in results with public institutions within the California State University system, public institutions within the University of California system, or private, faith-based institutions.

### **Recommendation 2: Student Affairs Leaders by Association Region**

It is recommended that this study be replicated with a focus on student affairs leaders by geographic region determined by NASPA, which includes regions separated by demographics in the United States (Regions I through VI); Latin America and Caribbean (LAC); and the Middle East, North Africa, South Asia (MENASA). It would be beneficial to see if trends in higher education and student affairs as determined by a national student affairs association like NASPA have any impact on the results.

### **Recommendation 3: Student Affairs Leaders by Functional Area**

It is recommended that this study be replicated with student affairs leaders in a single functional area. It would be beneficial to determine if the lived experiences within a single functional area of student affairs have any impact on the results. Student affairs leaders in this study were involved with a variety of functional areas like student engagement programs, residential education, and orientation programs.

### **Recommendation 4: Deans, Presidents, and Chancellors**

It is recommended that this study be replicated with the highest-level administrator at the university or college. It would be beneficial to determine if these

administrators would have different results if they managed departments and units beyond student affairs and student services.

#### **Recommendation 5: Thematic Meta-Analysis**

It is recommended that a meta-analysis of the peer researchers' combined results and findings be conducted to reveal similarities and differences across the different facets of educators and administrators. It would be beneficial to further understand how the practices of Sinek's (2019) infinite mindset can be utilized.

#### **Recommendation 6: Expanding Infinite Mindset Framework Literature**

It is recommended that additional phenomenological studies on Sinek's (2019) infinite mindset be conducted to add to the lack of literature on the framework and its applications in different industries and professional areas. It would be beneficial to continue to explore this mindset and learn how to support entry- and mid-level professionals in pursuing leadership and management roles in their industry of choice.

### **Concluding Remarks and Reflections**

The field of student affairs and higher education is vast and complex. Leading a student support or student affairs department requires a sense of balance between competing priorities and stakeholders and a willingness to stay student-centered. Student affairs leaders adapt and pivot to the challenges and obstacles their organizations face in times of crisis at their respective institutions (Kuk & Banning, 2009; Liddell et al., 2014; Tierney & Bensimon, 1996). This study has validated that exemplary student affairs leaders perceive the practices of Sinek's (2019) infinite mindset are embedded in some capacity within their organizations. By envisioning the idealized future state of supporting all students, the exemplary student affairs leader looks to sustain their

programs' success by making a consistent effort to assess the needs of students at their campus.

Exploring different functional areas in my professional career for the duration of this study and learning about the practices of Sinek's (2019) infinite mindset, the literature review, the data collection process, and data analysis have allowed me to reflect further upon my experiences in working with students. To me, the field of student affairs has been a way to seek new opportunities and new ways to improve upon the experiences I had as a student and the experiences in which I have supported students in throughout my time as a student affairs practitioner. Aspiring to become a student affairs leader myself, this research process has allowed me to understand the nuance and intentionality associated with making decisions and creating programs that will work toward the idealized future state of supporting each and every student with whom I work.

Having the opportunity to engage with exemplary student affairs leaders throughout this process has inspired me to continue to grow and develop as a professional in the field. The way they perceive and react to the challenges their organizations or departments face has taught me how leaders consider the historical contexts of their institutions and the ever-changing needs of the students on their campuses. Learning about the stories of how these leaders got to where they are today and what inspires them to be in the field has reinvigorated my passion for supporting students in my work.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Synthesis Matrix

Citation	Transformational Leadership	Servant Leadership	Authentic Leadership	Happenance Learning Theory	Path-Goal Theory	Growth Mindset	Infinite Game	Infinite Mindset	Just Cause	Trusting Teams	Worthy Rival	Existential Flexibility	Courage to Lead	Student Affairs & Higher Education	Methodology
<i>Albritton (1998)</i>	x						x	x					x		
<i>Anderson (2015)</i>	x														
<i>Avolio (2005)</i>	x						x	x				x			
<i>Avolio &amp; Bass (2002)</i>	x						x	x				x			
<i>Avolio et al. (2004)</i>			x												
<i>Avolio &amp; Luthans (2006)</i>			x												
<i>Bass (1985)</i>	x						x	x					x		
<i>Bass &amp; Riggio (2006)</i>	x						x	x	x						
<i>Bickle (2017)</i>					x										



Citation	Transformational Leadership	Servant Leadership	Authentic Leadership	Happenance Learning Theory	Path-Goal Theory	Growth Mindset	Infinite Game	Infinite Mindset	Just Cause	Trusting Teams	Worthy Rival	Existential Flexibility	Courage to Lead	Student Affairs & Higher Education	Methodology
<i>Brown (2018)</i>			x							x					
<i>Burla et al. (2008)</i>															x
<i>Burns (1978)</i>	x														
<i>Cameron &amp; Pierce (2002)</i>					x		x	x				x			
<i>Carse (1986)</i>							x	x	x						
<i>Cavazotte et al. (2021)</i>			x												
<i>Chan (2016)</i>														x	
<i>Cherry (2022)</i>	x						x	x					x		
<i>Creswell &amp; Creswell (2018)</i>															x
<i>Crisp et al. (2020)</i>														x	

Citation	Transformational Leadership	Servant Leadership	Authentic Leadership	Happenance Learning Theory	Path-Goal Theory	Growth Mindset	Infinite Game	Infinite Mindset	Just Cause	Trusting Teams	Worthy Rival	Existential Flexibility	Courage to Lead	Student Affairs & Higher Education	Methodology
<i>Crookston (1975)</i>														X	
<i>De Pree (1997)</i>		X													
<i>Dhiman (2011)</i>							X	X				X	X		
<i>Donohue (2020)</i>							X	X						X	
<i>Duran &amp; Allen (2020)</i>														X	
<i>Dweck (2006)</i>						X									
<i>Dweck (2007)</i>						X									
<i>Erickson (1995)</i>			X												
<i>Fairholm (1997)</i>		X													
<i>Fehr (2018)</i>							X	X		X					

Citation	Transformational Leadership	Servant Leadership	Authentic Leadership	Happenance Learning Theory	Path-Goal Theory	Growth Mindset	Infinite Game	Infinite Mindset	Just Cause	Trusting Teams	Worthy Rival	Existential Flexibility	Courage to Lead	Student Affairs & Higher Education	Methodology
<i>Finnigan &amp; Stewart (2009)</i>							x	x	x						
<i>Frick &amp; Spears (1996)</i>		x					x	x		x					
<i>Fusco et al. (2015)</i>				x			x	x		x					
<i>Gardner et al. (2005)</i>			x				x	x	x	x		x		x	
<i>George with Sims (2007)</i>			x												
<i>Goleman (1995)</i>							x	x				x			
<i>Greenleaf (1970)</i>		x													
<i>Greenleaf (2002)</i>		x													
<i>Grigorescu (2020)</i>							x	x							
<i>Harper (2004)</i>														x	

Citation	Transformational Leadership	Servant Leadership	Authentic Leadership	Happenance Learning Theory	Path-Goal Theory	Growth Mindset	Infinite Game	Infinite Mindset	Just Cause	Trusting Teams	Worthy Rival	Existential Flexibility	Courage to Lead	Student Affairs & Higher Education	Methodology
<i>Harre et al. (2017)</i>							x	x							
<i>House (1971)</i>					x		x	x				x			
<i>Keith (2015)</i>	x														
<i>Kezar (2004)</i>														x	
<i>Knox (2022)</i>							x	x				x		x	
<i>Komives &amp; Woodard (2003)</i>							x	x	x					x	
<i>Kouzes &amp; Posner (2012)</i>														x	
<i>Krumboltz (2009)</i>				x			x	x		x					
<i>Kuk &amp; Banning (2009)</i>														x	
<i>Lassiter (2017)</i>							x	x					x		

Citation	Transformational Leadership	Servant Leadership	Authentic Leadership	Happenance Learning Theory	Path-Goal Theory	Growth Mindset	Infinite Game	Infinite Mindset	Just Cause	Trusting Teams	Worthy Rival	Existential Flexibility	Courage to Lead	Student Affairs & Higher Education	Methodology
<i>Lencioni (2002)</i>							x	x		x					
<i>Liddell et al. (2014)</i>														x	
<i>Liden et al. (2014)</i>		x													
<i>Liden et al. (2008)</i>		x													
<i>Lindsay (2014)</i>														x	
<i>Lombard et al. (2004)</i>															x
<i>Long (2012)</i>							x	x	x	x	x		x	x	
<i>Magnuson et al. (2003)</i>				x											
<i>Malphurs (1996)</i>		x													
<i>March (1994)</i>		x													

Citation	Transformational Leadership	Servant Leadership	Authentic Leadership	Happenance Learning Theory	Path-Goal Theory	Growth Mindset	Infinite Game	Infinite Mindset	Just Cause	Trusting Teams	Worthy Rival	Existential Flexibility	Courage to Lead	Student Affairs & Higher Education	Methodology
<i>Marshall et al. (2016)</i>														x	
<i>Mascareno et al. (2020)</i>							x	x	x						
<i>McMillan &amp; Schumacher (2010)</i>															x
<i>Millennial Executive (2021)</i>							x	x			x				
<i>Mintz (2018)</i>														x	
<i>Mintz (2022)</i>							x	x					x	x	
<i>Muller et al. (2017)</i>														x	
<i>Newsome (2020)</i>							x	x						x	
<i>Noghiu (2020)</i>							x	x	x					x	
<i>O'Reilly &amp; Pfeffer (2000)</i>															x

Citation	Transformational Leadership	Servant Leadership	Authentic Leadership	Happenance Learning Theory	Path-Goal Theory	Growth Mindset	Infinite Game	Infinite Mindset	Just Cause	Trusting Teams	Worthy Rival	Existential Flexibility	Courage to Lead	Student Affairs & Higher Education	Methodology
<i>Owen (2015)</i>							x	x				x			
<i>Oxendine (2014)</i>						x									
<i>Patten &amp; Newhart (2018)</i>															x
<i>Patton (2015)</i>															x
<i>Patton (2018)</i>															x
<i>Phillips &amp; Phillips (2016)</i>					x										
<i>Pope et al. (2019)</i>							x	x		x				x	
<i>Pritchard &amp; McChesney (2018)</i>														x	x
<i>Public Policy Institute of California (2019)</i>														x	
<i>Randall &amp; Globetti (1992)</i>														x	

Citation	Transformational Leadership	Servant Leadership	Authentic Leadership	Happenance Learning Theory	Path-Goal Theory	Growth Mindset	Infinite Game	Infinite Mindset	Just Cause	Trusting Teams	Worthy Rival	Existential Flexibility	Courage to Lead	Student Affairs & Higher Education	Methodology
<i>Rauch &amp; Behling (1984)</i>	x														
<i>Roberts &amp; Hyatt (2018)</i>															x
<i>Rosenberger (2017)</i>						x									
<i>Rozeboom (2008)</i>														x	
<i>Russell (2001)</i>	x														
<i>Saleem et al. (2021)</i>					x										
<i>Sandeen (1991)</i>														x	
<i>Sandeen (2004)</i>														x	
<i>Sarsfield &amp; Garson (2018)</i>															x
<i>Schroeder (2022)</i>			x				x	x			x	x		x	
<i>Sendjaya &amp; Sarros (2002)</i>	x														



Citation	Transformational Leadership	Servant Leadership	Authentic Leadership	Happenance Learning Theory	Path-Goal Theory	Growth Mindset	Infinite Game	Infinite Mindset	Just Cause	Trusting Teams	Worthy Rival	Existential Flexibility	Courage to Lead	Student Affairs & Higher Education	Methodology
<i>Sinek (2019)</i>	x	x				x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		
<i>Smith &amp; Hughey (2006)</i>														x	
<i>Stewart-Tillman &amp; Joyce (2017)</i>														x	
<i>Tierney &amp; Bensimon (1996)</i>														x	
<i>Ungvarsky (2020)</i>															x
<i>UnivStats (n.d.)</i>														x	x
<i>van Dierendonck &amp; Patterson (2015)</i>		x													
<i>Walumbwa et al. (2008)</i>			x												
<i>Wilkes (1996)</i>	x														
<i>Zohrabi (2013)</i>															x

## APPENDIX B

### Informed Consent

#### INFORMED CONSENT FORM INFORMATION

**ABOUT:** The Infinite Mindset: A Phenomenological Study of Exemplary Student Affairs Leaders

**RESPONSIBLE INVESTIGATOR:** *Kevin Giang*

**PURPOSE OF STUDY:** You are being asked to participate in a research study conducted by Kevin Giang, a doctoral student from the School of Education at University of Massachusetts Global. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore and describe how exemplary leaders perceive the practices of Simon Sinek's Infinite Mindset Framework are embedded within their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results. A further purpose of this study was to understand the organizational supports and barriers exemplary leaders perceive affect the development of an infinite mindset.

By participating in this study, I agree to participate in an individual interview. The interview will last approximately 45 – 60 minutes and will be conducted electronically using Zoom. Completion of the individual interview will take place [DATE].

**I understand that:**

- a) There are minimal risks associated with participating in this research. I understand that the Investigator will protect my confidentiality by keeping the identifying codes and research materials in a locked file drawer that is available only to the researcher.
- b) I understand that the interview will be recorded. The recordings will be available only to the researcher and the professional transcriptionist. The recordings will be used to capture the interview dialogue and to ensure the accuracy of the information collected during the interview. All information will be identifier-redacted and my confidentiality will be maintained. Upon completion of the study all recordings will be destroyed. All other data and consents will be securely stored for three years after completion of data collection and confidentially shredded or fully deleted.
- c) The possible benefit of this study to me is that my input may help add to the research regarding the lived experiences of exemplary student affairs leaders that produce extraordinary results. The findings will be available to me at the conclusion of the study. I understand that I will not be compensated for my participation.

d) If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact Kevin Giang at [kgiang@mail.umassglobal.edu](mailto:kgiang@mail.umassglobal.edu) or by phone at (714) 823-7880; or Dr. Cindy Petersen (Advisor) at [cpeterse@umassglobal.edu](mailto:cpeterse@umassglobal.edu)

e) My participation in this research study is voluntary. I may decide to not participate in the study and I can withdraw at any time. I can also decide not to answer particular questions during the interview if I so choose. I understand that I may refuse to participate or may withdraw from this study at any time without any negative consequences. Also, the Investigator may stop the study at any time.

f) No information that identifies me will be released without my separate consent and that all identifiable information will be protected to the limits allowed by law. If the study design or the use of the data is to be changed, I will be informed and my consent re-obtained. I understand that if I have any questions, comments, or concerns about the study or the informed consent process, I may write or call the Office of the Vice Chancellor of Academic Affairs, UMASS GLOBAL, at 16355 Laguna Canyon Road, Irvine, CA 92618, (949) 341-7641.

I acknowledge that I have received a copy of this form and the “Research Participant’s Bill of Rights.” I have read the above and understand it and hereby consent to the procedure(s) set forth.

---

Signature of Participant

---

Signature of Principal Investigator

---

Date

## APPENDIX C

### Research Participant's Bill of Rights



#### UMASS GLOBAL INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD Research

##### Participant's Bill of Rights

Any person who is requested to consent to participate as a subject in an experiment, or who is requested to consent on behalf of another, has the following rights:

1. To be told what the study is attempting to discover.
2. To be told what will happen in the study and whether any of the procedures, drugs or devices are different from what would be used in standard practice.
3. To be told about the risks, side effects or discomforts of the things that may happen to him/her.
4. To be told if he/she can expect any benefit from participating and, if so, what the benefits might be.
5. To be told what other choices he/she has and how they may be better or worse than being in the study.
6. To be allowed to ask any questions concerning the study both before agreeing to be involved and during the course of the study.
7. To be told what sort of medical treatment is available if any complications arise.
8. To refuse to participate at all before or after the study is started without any adverse effects.
9. To receive a copy of the signed and dated consent form.
10. To be free of pressures when considering whether he/she wishes to agree to be in the study.

If at any time you have questions regarding a research study, you should ask the researchers to answer them. You also may contact the UMASS GLOBAL Institutional Review Board, which is concerned with the protection of volunteers in research projects. The UMass Global Institutional Review Board may be contacted either by telephoning the Office of Academic Affairs at (949) 341-9937 or by writing to the Vice Chancellor of Academic Affairs, UMASS GLOBAL, 16355 Laguna Canyon Road, Irvine, CA, 92618.

## APPENDIX D

### Interview Questions, Operational Definitions, and Infographic

#### Interview Questions:

1. Please share how your organization ensures priorities are connected to the organization's vision and aspirations.
2. How does your organization connect values and sense of purpose to advance the organization's just cause?
3. What practices does your organization use to create a trusting and mutually supportive team environment?
4. How does your organization promote a psychologically safe space that fosters trust?
5. How does your organization learn from other successful leaders or organizations?
6. How do people within your organization learn from successful people who hold the same/similar positions?
7. How does your organization identify new opportunities to achieve the organization's vision?
8. Tell me about the time that staying on the same path was not going to fulfill your organization's just cause?
9. How does your organization stay aligned with its values and goals when pressured to take a different path?
10. How does your organization model the willingness to take risks?
11. What supports exist within your organization that foster the embedding of Infinite Mindset practices?
12. What barriers exist within your organization that hinder the embedding of Infinite Mindset practices?

#### Operational Definitions:

##### *Just Cause*

A Just Cause is a vision of an idealized, aspirational future, something bigger than ourselves and the organization. It connects to and reflects the values, emotions, and a sense of purpose of the followers, motivating them to make sacrifices to achieve it. (Sinek, 2019; Noghiu 2020; Mascareno, et al, 2019; Finnigan & Stewart, 2009; Carse, 1986).

##### *Trusting Teams*

A trusting team is a unit where individuals work together to know each other at a deep level and care about and value one another, while creating a high performing team environment that includes active listening, vulnerability, integrity, and personal

accountability in a psychologically safe space (Sinek, 2019; Lencioni 2006; Fehr, 2018).

### *Worthy Rivals*

Worthy Rivals are successful industry leaders who perform as well as or better than a leader or their organization. Leaders or organizations are inspired to study these players and improve based on the strengths and abilities identified in them. (Sinek, 2019; The Millennial Executive, 2021)

### *The Courage to Lead*

The Courage to Lead is the ability to stand up to pressures or norms that do not align with organizational or individual goals and values and is characterized by the willingness to take risks for sustained success in an unknown, idealized future. (Sinek, 2019; Lassiter, 2021)

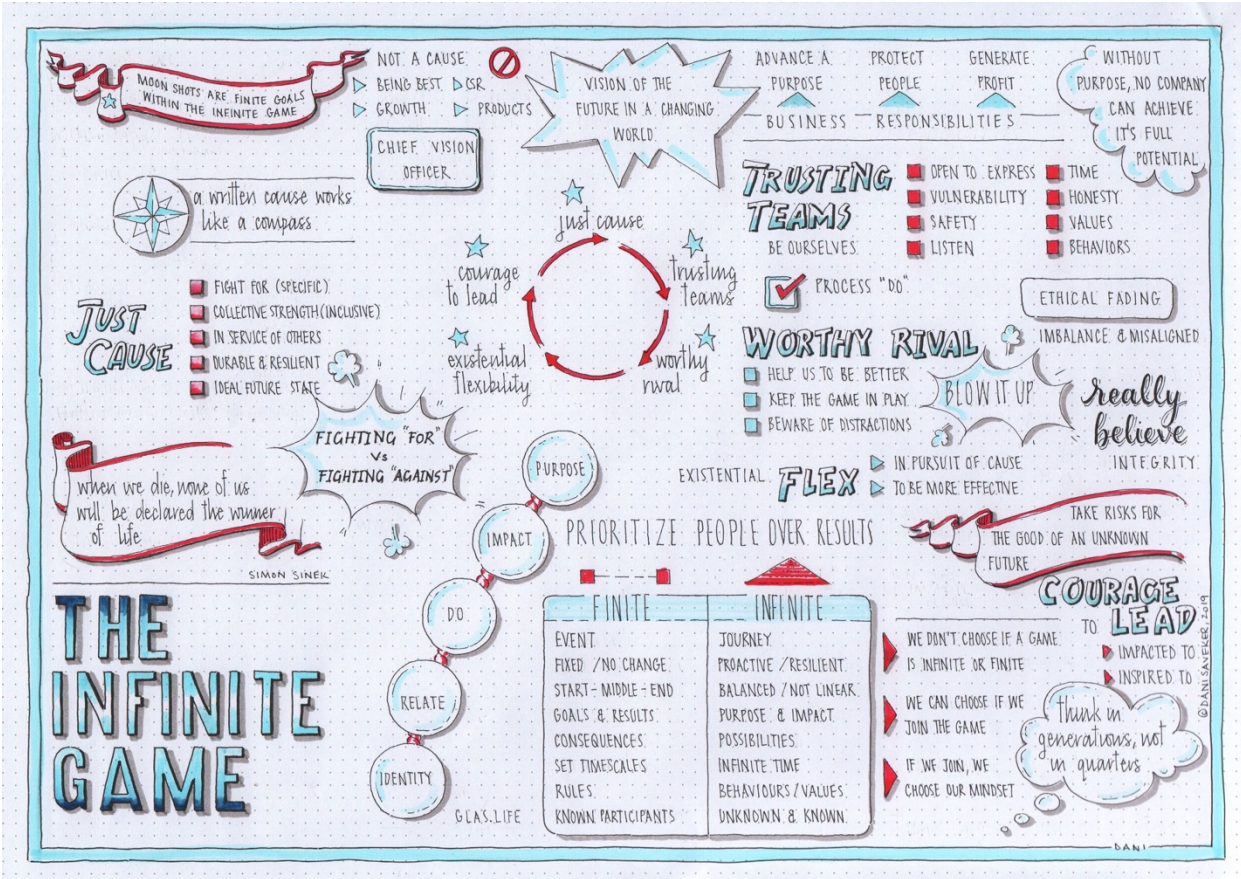
### *Existential Flexibility*

Existential flexibility is a leader's ability to anticipate changing conditions and initiate a potentially risky strategic disruption to set the organization on a new path necessary to achieve the idealized future. (Dhiman, 2011; Sinek, 2019; see also Avolio, 2005; Goleman, 1995; Shankman, Allen, & Haber-Curran, in press, as cited in Owen, 2015)

### *Infinite Mindset*

An Infinite Mindset is a leader's desire to inspire their organization to continually learn and grow to achieve profound results that extend into the future without limits. A leader with an infinite mindset follows five essential practices: advance a Just Cause, build Trusting Teams, study their Worthy Rivals, prepare for Existential Flexibility, and demonstrate the Courage to Lead. (Carse, 1986; Dweck, 2007; Sinek, 2019)

Infographic:



## APPENDIX E

### Observer Field Test Feedback Form

Conducting interviews is a learned skill set based on experience and feedback. Gaining valuable insight about interview skills and affect with the interview will support the collection of data gathering when interviewing actual participants. As the interview observer you should reflect on the questions below after the interview is finished. You should provide independent feedback at the conclusion of the interview field test. As an observer you should take notes that will assist the interviewer to be successful in improving their interview skills.

1. How long did the interview take? \_\_\_\_\_ Did the time seem appropriate?
2. Did the interviewer communicate in a receptive, cordial, and encouraging manner?
3. Was the introduction of the interview friendly with the use of commonly understood language?
4. How did the interviewee feel during the interview?
5. Was the interviewer prepared and relaxed during the interview?
6. Did the interviewee understand the interview questions or did they require clarification?
7. What parts of the interview went smoothly and why?
8. What parts of the interview seem to struggle and why do you think that was the case?
9. Did the interviewer maintain objectivity and avoid interjecting value judgements or leading the interviewee?



10. Did the interviewer take the opportunity to discuss or request artifacts that support the data gathered from the interview?

11. If you were to change any part of the interview, what would that part be and how would you suggest changing it?

12. What suggestions do you have for improving the overall process?

\*Conducting interviews virtually is different than face-to-face and requires more attention to number 2 & 3 above. As an observer give specific feedback on these items.

## APPENDIX F

### Participant Field Test Feedback Form

While conducting the interview you should take notes of their clarification request or comments about not being clear about the question. After you complete the interview ask your field test interviewee the following clarifying questions. Try not to make it another interview; just have a friendly conversation. Either script or record their feedback so you can compare with the other two members of your team to develop your feedback report on how to improve the interview questions.

Before the brief post interview discussion, give the interviewee a copy of the interview protocol. If their answers imply that some kind of improvement is necessary, follow up for specificity.

1. How did you feel about the interview? Do you think you had ample opportunities to describe what you do as a leader when working with your team or staff?
2. Did you feel the amount of time for the interview was ok?
3. Were the questions by and large clear or were there places where you were uncertain what was being asked? If the interview indicates some uncertainty, be sure to find out where in the interview it occurred.
4. Can you recall any words or terms being asked about during the interview that were confusing?
5. And finally, did I appear comfortable during the interview... (I'm pretty new at this)?

Remember, the key is to use common, conversational language and very user friendly approach. Put emotional intelligence to work.

NOTE: Red font is for your eyes and support info only

## APPENDIX G

### **Interviewer Feedback Reflection Questions**

Conducting interviews is a learned skill set/experience. Gaining valuable insight about your interview skills and affect with the interview will support your data gathering when interviewing the actual participants. As the researcher you should reflect on the questions below after completing the interview. You should also discuss the following reflection questions with your 'observer' after completing the interview field test. The questions are written from your perspective as the interviewer. However, you can verbalize your thoughts with the observer and they can add valuable insight from their observation.

1. How long did the interview take? \_\_\_\_\_ Did the time seem to be appropriate?
2. How did you feel during the interview? Comfortable? Nervous?
3. Going into it, did you feel prepared to conduct the interview? Is there something you could have done to be better prepared?
4. What parts of the interview went the most smoothly and why do you think that was the case?
5. What parts of the interview seemed to struggle and why do you think that was the case?
6. If you were to change any part of the interview, what would that part be and how would you change it?
7. What suggestions do you have for improving the overall process?

APPENDIX H

Demographics Form

## Demographics Form (Researcher: Kevin Giang)

[Sign in to Google](#) to save your progress. [Learn more](#)

\* Required

**Ethnicity:** With which race/ethnicity do you identify? (Select all that apply) \*

We realize that the racial/ethnic category you selected encompasses many different nationalities. If you are interested in sharing more, please describe your nationality (i.e., Armenian, Puerto Rican, Vietnamese).

- African American or Black
- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Asian American or Asian
- Hispanic or Latinx
- Middle Eastern or North African
- Pacific Islander
- White or Caucasian
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

**Gender:** With which gender do you identify? \*

- Woman
- Man
- Agender
- Transgender
- Non-binary
- Genderqueer or gender nonconforming
- Decline to state
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

**Years of Experience in the Field:** How many years of experience do you have in the field of education? \*

- 1 - 4 years
- 5 - 8 years
- 9-12 years
- 13 or more years

**Years of Experience in Current Position:** How many years of experience do you have in your organization in your current position? \*

- 1- 4 years
- 5 - 8 years
- 9 -12 years
- 13 or more years

**Degrees:** What is your highest degree or level of school you have completed? \*

Your answer \_\_\_\_\_

**Degrees:** Are there any additional professional certificates or degrees that you have earned? \*

Your answer \_\_\_\_\_

Please fill out this field.

**Degrees:** Are you currently enrolled in any educational programs? If so, what kinds of programs? \*

Your answer \_\_\_\_\_

Submit

Clear form

APPENDIX I

**Alignment Table for Research & Interview Questions**

Variable & Research Question	Definition of Variable	Interview Question
<p>Advance a just cause</p> <p>How do exemplary leaders perceive the practice of advance a just cause is embedded in their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results?</p>	<p>A just cause is a vision of an idealized, aspirational future, something bigger than ourselves and the organization. It connects to and reflects the values, emotions, and a sense of purpose of the followers, motivating them to make sacrifices to achieve it. (Carse, 1986; Finnigan &amp; Stewart, 2009; Mascareno et al., 2019; Noghiu, 2020; Sinek, 2019).</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Please share how your organization ensures priorities are connected to the organization’s vision and aspirations.</li> <li>2. How does your organization connect values and sense of purpose to advance the organization’s just cause?</li> </ol>
<p>Build trusting teams</p> <p>How do exemplary leaders perceive the practice of build trusting teams is embedded in their organization to inspire extraordinary results?</p>	<p>A trusting team is a unit where individuals work together to know each other at a deep level and care about and value one another, while creating a high performing team environment that includes active listening, vulnerability, integrity, and personal accountability in a psychologically safe space (Fehr, 2018; Lencioni, 2006; Sinek, 2019).</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>3. What practices does your organization use to create a trusting and mutually supportive team environment?</li> <li>4. How does your organization promote a psychologically safe space that fosters trust?</li> </ol>
<p>Study your worthy rival</p> <p>How do exemplary leaders perceive the practice of study your worthy rival is embedded in their organization to inspire extraordinary results?</p>	<p>Worthy Rivals are successful industry leaders who perform as well as or better than a leader or their organization. Leaders or organizations are inspired to study these players and improve based on the</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>5. How does your organization learn from other successful leaders or organizations?</li> <li>6. How do people within your</li> </ol>



	strengths and abilities identified in them (Millennial Executive, 2021; Sinek, 2019).	organization learn from successful people who hold the same/similar positions?
<p>Preparing for existential flexibility</p> <p>How do exemplary leaders perceive the practice of preparing for existential flexibility is embedded in their organization to inspire extraordinary results?</p>	<p>Existential flexibility is a leader's ability to anticipate changing conditions and initiate a potentially risky strategic disruption to set the organization on a new path necessary to achieve the idealized future (Avolio, 2005; Dhiman, 2011; Goleman, 1995; Owen, 2015; Sinek, 2019).</p>	<p>7. How does your organization identify new opportunities to achieve the organization's vision?</p> <p>8. Tell me about the time that staying on the same path was not going to fulfill your organization's just cause?</p>
<p>Demonstrating the courage to lead</p> <p>How do exemplary leaders perceive the practice of demonstrating the courage to lead is embedded in their organization to inspire extraordinary results?</p>	<p>The Courage to Lead is a leader's ability to stand up against/to pressures or norms that do not align with organizational or individual goals and values and is characterized by the willingness to take risks for sustained success in an unknown, idealized future (Lassiter, 2021; Sinek, 2019).</p>	<p>9. How does your organization stay aligned with its values and goals when pressured to take a different path?</p> <p>10. How does your organization model the willingness to take risks?</p>
<p>Organizational supports and barriers</p> <p>What are the organizational supports and barriers exemplary leaders perceive affect the development of an infinite mindset?</p>	<p>An infinite mindset is a leader's desire to inspire their organization to continually learn and grow to achieve profound results that extend into the future without limits. A leader with an infinite mindset follows five essential practices: advance a just</p>	<p>11. What supports exist within your organization that foster the embedding of Infinite Mindset practices?</p> <p>12. What barriers exist within your</p>

	cause, build trusting teams, study their worthy rivals, prepare for existential flexibility, and demonstrate the courage to lead (Carse, 1986; Dweck, 2007; Sinek, 2019).	organization that hinder the embedding of Infinite Mindset practices?
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