THE PRACTICE OF POLICY: AN EXPLORATION OF LEADERSHIP TRAITS IN GEAR UP TN – WEST

Shayla Kolheim

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THE PRACTICE OF POLICY: AN EXPLORATION OF LEADERSHIP TRADES IN GEAR

UP TN – WEST

By

Shayla Guy Kolheim

A Dissertation Proposal
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
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Abstract

This study explored the implementation practices of leaders that increased college going rates. To learn of their practices, this study employed semi-structured interviews to gain responses to: How do principals and site coordinators of GEAR UP TN -West communities define successful collaboration with nonprofits and Higher Education Institutions, What perceived principal and site coordinator leadership traits create effective engagement between community stakeholders and high schools, and What engagement practices were most often used in Collaboratives that increased college-going rates by five or more percentage points? The interviews identified Operational Inputs, Stakeholder Engagement and Overcoming Challenges as themes and responses to the research questions. The leadership literature primarily coincided with the leadership traits and practices identified and observed by the interviewees. The points of departures from the literature highlighted the Intermediary’s role as a transformational leader and the topic of sustainability. Based upon the findings of the study and its relation to the literature, this study encourages an increase accountability in grant implementation from the Intermediary, Collaborative teams, and Policy Makers. The prescribed actions for increased accountability are proposed to address education inequities and serve as development support for future practitioners.

Keywords: Transformational leadership, leader-member exchange, The Morrill Act, The Higher Education Act of 1965, GEAR UP TN
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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents, Larry and Lula Guy, my husband, Kelvin Kolheim and my siblings, Stephanie Oliver (Beedie), Dr. Teramena (Terri) Oliver, Kisha Rose Wiley (Mario), Jason McCracken, Traci Kolheim, Kendall Kolheim (Claire) and to my grandparents who planted the seeds that I harvest.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

This study focused on the GEAR UP TN leadership skills that had a differential impact in West Tennessee. Each collaborative selected for this study raised college-going rates college-going rates by at least five percentage points from the initial 3-year trend baseline. Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP) is a U.S. Department of Education discretionary grant-funded program (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). The goal of the federally funded grant is to increase the number of low-income students who enter and prosper in postsecondary institutions. GEAR UP grants provide opportunities for educational innovation in high-poverty areas. Specifically, the purpose of the grants is to improve the college readiness of middle and high school students from lower-income backgrounds. Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC), the governing agency for all colleges and universities in Tennessee, received its first GEAR UP grant, GEAR UP TN, in 2005. The state-regulated initiatives focused on nine rural counties and produced a 10.8% increase in college-going rates (THEC, 2018). GEAR UP TN objectives are to:

1. Increase educational expectations of GEAR UP TN students and families through expanded knowledge of postsecondary access and financial aid opportunities.
2. Enhance GEAR UP TN students’ academic preparation to improve high school graduation rates and postsecondary enrollment, retention, and completion.
3. Provide effective professional development for classroom teachers, school, and system staff to ensure increased academic rigor and postsecondary preparation.
4. Encourage community engagement through GEAR UP TN to sustain an environment supportive of college access and lifelong learning. (p. 4)
In 2012, Tennessee received a $4,227,183 state grant and subsequently provided 15 sub-awards to local education agencies (LEAs). In November 2012, I was hired to assist as the West Tennessee Regional Coordinator for THEC’s Student Access and Success Department. In this position, I worked with two urban and seven rural LEAs. I provided project development and management to teams or collaboratives through annual work plans, including yearly activities, industry-relevant training, completion deadlines, and budget expenditures totaling $1,542,988.

The goal of each collaborative was to fulfill the grant funding’s research-based, best practice requirements. In my time with THEC, I learned the possibility of implementing many of the practices without additional funding. According to the University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research, the work of the collaboratives mirrored the five supports needed to secure school improvement: professional capacity, parent/community, student-centered learning, instructional guidance, and leadership, the focus of this study (Sebring, 2006). Collaboratively, the five supports increased student learning and provided insight into the effects of external environments on the ability to adapt the framework and the supports at a school. The University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research report also showed a correlation between a school’s ability to improve and social capital. Specifically, the authors found that community context influenced a school’s capacity for improvement (Bryk, 2010). According to GEAR UP TN implementation artifacts, including Implementation Guides and Statewide Kick-off Presentations, the GEAR UP TN principal and site coordinator mediated the community context. These individuals’ ability to leverage funding to increase college-going rates by increasing the human capital of their schools and mobilizing internal and external stakeholders was based not only on the individuals but also on the relationships they shared. Kellerman (2007) suggested
that leadership is a component rooted in the connection between the leader and followers, and this connection often results in increased engagement, which produces outcomes for the agency.

With the GEAR UP TN awards, 15 collaboratives across Tennessee received sub-awards for the implementation of the same services used to improve college-going rates. Each of the eight awarded collaboratives in West Tennessee increased college-going rates by 2.5%, with six showing increases of more than 10%. The rewards had standardized criteria and services; however, there were differences among sites in their demographics, implementation activities, and leaders. The following section presents federal attempts to increase college-going rates, indicating the arduousness of the task. The principals and site coordinators who increased college-going rates exemplified Kouzes and Posner’s (1987) leadership definition by “mobilizing others to want to struggle for shared aspirations” (p. 30). This study addressed leadership by focusing on the individual styles of principals and site coordinators and the traits of their internal and external relationships. The goal of this study was to identify the best practices that contributed to improving college-going rates in the selected West Tennessee collaboratives.

**Background of the Study—Higher Education Policies**

**The Morrill Acts of 1862 and 1890**

The Morrill Act of 1862 enabled state officials to sell 30,000 acres of land to establish higher-learning institutions (Gavazzi & Gee, 2018). In 1862, a college education was a right reserved for White, higher-income men typically from metropolitan areas (Lee, 1963). The Act was a means of changing the accessibility of higher education via a bill of rights for safeguarding religious freedom and prohibiting slavery in the newly established territories (Mack & Stolarick, 2014). Most notably, the Act was a way to establish higher education for recently freed Blacks, provide a structured education to farmers and rural Americans, and enable state government
leaders to create systems and institutions of higher learning (Lee, 1963). Despite the success of procuring state participation, the Act quickly became one of its biggest hindrances. Each state’s socioeconomic conditions and leadership were fundamental determinants of or hindrances to the interpretation and implementation of the Act, most notably in the South with the reentrance of states into the Union after the Civil War. The lawful establishment of Black Codes intended to improve the accessibility of higher education was severely hindered, presenting a barrier to fulfilling the intention of the Morrill Act of 1862 (Wrone). According to Senator Morrill,

Having emancipated a whole race, shall it be said that there our duty ends, leaving the race as cumberers of the ground, to live or to wilt and perish, as the case may be? They are members of the American family, and their advancement concerns us all. While swiftly forgetting all they ever knew as slaves, shall they have no opportunity to learn anything as freemen? (Paris, 2020)

By 1890, the political systems of that period did not support Blacks’ education. As a result of racial discrimination, the Morrill Act of 1890 was the first widespread federal effort to provide learning opportunities to marginalized groups, specifically Blacks (Mack & Stolarick, 2014). The act resulted in the establishment of historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), which were significant contributors to the economic and professional mobility of Blacks. According to Nash (2019), the Morrill Acts were the first federal attempts, mishaps, and corrections associated with widespread efforts to improve the accessibility of marginalized groups to higher education. Whereas government officials passed many laws to support improved college access, the following overall attempt occurred with the Higher Education Act of 1965 (HEA).
The Higher Education Act of 1965

In 1954, Chief Justice Earl Warren wrote the court’s official decision regarding the unanimous Brown v. Board of Education decision, stating,

Education is perhaps the most important function of state and local governments. Today, it is a principal instrument in awakening the child to cultural values, in preparing him for later professional training, and in helping him to adjust normally to his environment. These days, it is doubtful that any child may reasonably be expected to succeed in life if he is denied the opportunity of an education. Such an opportunity, where the state has undertaken to provide it, is a right which must be made available to all on equal terms. (Transcript of Brown v. Board of Education, 1954)

Ten years later, President Lyndon B. Johnson stood before the nation with an understanding that no single policy was a means of advancing the people; therefore, change required a shift. Life after Brown v. Board of Education showed that educational policies alone were not effective in economically furthering traditionally disadvantaged or disengaged peoples. President Johnson made a promise to shift from passive 14th Amendment compliance to a stance of war:

This budget, and this year’s legislative program, are designed to help every American citizen fulfill his basic hopes—his hopes for a fair chance to make good; his hopes for fair play from the law; his hopes for a full-time job on full-time pay; his hopes for a decent home for his family in a decent community; his hopes for a good school for his children with good teachers; and his hopes for security when faced with sickness or unemployment or old age. Unfortunately, many Americans live on the outskirts of hope—some because of their poverty, and some because of their color, and all too many
because of both. Our task is to help replace their despair with opportunity. This administration today, here and now, declares unconditional war on poverty in America. I urge this Congress and all Americans to join with me in that effort. (Moses, 2015, p. 78)

Johnson’s promise was the precedent of policies for advancing people experiencing poverty or economic disadvantages because of race.

President Johnson’s War on Poverty legislation included The Civil Rights Act of 1964, The Fair Housing Act, The Elementary and Secondary Act, The Voting Rights Act of 1965, and the starting point of this study, the HEA (Keppel, 1987). The HEA included provisions for students and institutions of higher learning. In addition to support for students preparing for college, this legislation provided grants through Title IV (TRIO Programs) to prepare traditionally under resourced students for postsecondary education. TRIO Programs, including Upward Bound, Talent Search, and Student Support Services, are awarded through a competitive process to states, LEAs, and higher education institutions. The goal of the programs is to increase students’ knowledge about financing college, admissions processes, academic requirements, and social preparedness (U.S. Department of Education, 2011).

**GEAR UP**

By 1992, the federal government had provided numerous grant opportunities and the National Early Intervention Scholarship and Partnership Program (NEISP). NEISP gave states an opportunity to provide academic interventions and tuition support to students (State Grant Programs, 1999, pp. 27–34). In 1998, GEAR UP legislation replaced NEISP, providing two types of competitive grant opportunities: state and partnership. State grants are contracts awarded to state educational agencies. Partnership grants are contracts awarded to collaboratives comprised of an LEA and a higher education institution. Each grant type must provide precollege
interventions and scholarship opportunities for students in high-poverty areas (U.S. Department of Education, CFDA Number: 84.334A; 84.334S). Since its inception, GEAR UP has provided college access initiatives and scholarships to millions of students across the United States and currently serve 523,000 students (NCCEP, 2020).

**Statement of Problem**

There is an intellectual void due to a lack of investigative studies on the leadership traits of the GEAR UP TN principals and site coordinators responsible for implementing the required services and activities at a regional level. Although three summative evaluations addressed the impact of GEAR UP TN on college-going rates in awarded counties, they focused on implementing agents’ leadership styles. With the use of THEC summative data, the selected counties’ educational profiles, and national data, the goal of this study was to provide literature on GEAR UP TN collaborative leadership, successful discretionary grant implementation, and increased college-going rates in West Tennessee. There is a need for training resources focused on principals’ and site coordinators’ leadership and management styles (Chapman et al., 2008).

**Significance of the Study**

**Personally**

I have a twofold attachment to the topic of the role of effective leadership in implementing discretionary funding. The influences of this literary work were hardworking individuals who have striven to alleviate societal problems despite the hindrances of policies. I drew guidance from civil rights activist Ella Baker’s notion that leadership is not about producing oneself as a leader but developing others’ leadership capacity. Leveraging federal funding to address structural and systemic oppression is a fascinating topic that reads somewhat like fragmented poetic justice. The entity that produced the problem must provide the resources
to address the issue and be the gatekeeper for the resources. While at THEC, I witnessed well-intentioned principals’ and site coordinators’ unsuccessful attempts to gain financial resources because of their lack of esteemed presentation and inability to unite or mobilize community resources. I saw this situation occur to principals with the desire and the need but without the leadership traits necessary to secure human and fiscal resources. As such, I desire to learn more, fueled by a moral obligation to take the information I learned and share it with groups focused on addressing societal ills or, more specifically, generational poverty.

Professional

The goal of federal and state funding via grants or allocations for LEAs and higher education institutions is to improve collegiate accessibility. The budget typically supports targeted initiatives for a small portion of an affected population. By contributing to the research, I intend to develop training and resources to help community stakeholders understand the best leadership practices for engaging community stakeholders successfully.

This desire to scale leadership best practices originated from my early research on the Morrill Act of 1862. The law was an obligation of state governments to provide educational opportunities for citizens. The initial Act gave funding and 30,000 acres to states for institutions teaching agriculture and manufacturing. The Act’s 1890 reincarnation explicitly mandated allocating funds fairly and unbiasedly. Initially, the goal was to ensure all members of the given community received the opportunity to learn. However, the law’s interpretation did not have the intended implementation or outcomes, leading to the 1890 ratification of a modified Morrill Act. Advancements such as the National Association of Colored Women, the formation of Black insurance companies and banks, and Black state-supported institutions for educating minorities resulted from a firm stance against blatant policy noncompliance (Harper et al., 2009). These
advancements resulted from the stakeholders’ collaborative efforts and leaders determined to transform existing constructs, conditions, or cultures. The Morrill Act serves as an early example of leveraging federal resources to improve the educational attainment of economically at-risk communities. The HEA was a way to further the effort to increase the educational attainment of individuals and communities (Keppel, 1987). GEAR UP and GEAR UP TN grant implementation combine the discretionary funding provided by the HEA with existing LEA or community resources. The success of implementation occurs based on the ability of the leaders to navigate and employ both resources.

Practically and Scholarly

A result of this study could be increased availability of the best practices related to GEAR UP TN grant leadership and implementation to practitioners. There are numerous studies on transformational leadership theory (TLT), which was one part of this study’s foundation. Leader-member exchange (LMX) theory was another framework used to explore the relationship between the principals and the site coordinators to avoid myopic leadership research. Moreover, using the LMX and TLT theories as frameworks to identify best practices showed the engagement tools were useful for improving ’the leadership capacity of different stakeholder groups. This study contributed to the literature through the identification and categorization of the leadership factors that, when combined, produce positive gains for students and the GEAR UP staff who serve them. By presenting the collaborative best practices, this study could enable practitioners to focus on solutions within their control to better position themselves for addressing and countering structural hindrances outside of their control.

Stewart (2006) wrote, “School systems have become a source of blame for the many ills that affect our society” (p. 3). I have witnessed the impact of blame in my profession and thus
decided to focus my academic pursuits on challenging this perception. Blame occurs when individuals perceive themselves as separate from agencies or individuals. Blame does not address the interrelated nature of education and community and their systems. Whether one views educational agencies in tandem with community or kinship, educational agencies remain bound through a focus on educating, protecting, and fostering culture. Leadership is an avenue for mediating the blame and creating systems of cooperation between internal and external stakeholders.

This study’s foundation comprised TLT and LMX theory. The TLT is a framework for centering leadership outcomes on social change through relationships and resources. TLT was the primary leadership style of focus due to its efforts to “raise[s] the level of human conduct, ethical aspiration of both the leader and the led” and address societal ills (Burns, 1978, p. 20). I wanted to learn if the GEAR UP TN – West collaboratives with increased college-going rates also had high levels of transformational leadership characteristics (Bass & Avolio, 1994; Leithwood & Jantzi 2000). As such, TLT was the theory used to guide the interview questions and obtain the participants’ self-reported leadership characteristics and perceived leadership characteristics of their colleagues.

The relationships involved in the GEAR UP TN collaboratives also underwent investigation to increase the depth of this study. In relationships, TLT focuses on leaders’ and followers’ affiliations that enable both parties to promote each other to higher standards and constructive change (Burns, 2003). The positive characteristics associated with the exchange between the leader and followers are means of increasing the school system’s social capital, producing traits that mirror the attributes of in-group LMX (Gerstner & Day, 1997). TLT was the theory used to indicate the individual characteristics of a leader; LMX was appropriate to
investigate leadership and identify the features of the leaders’ relationships and interactions. LMX was a means to develop interview questions on the relationships within the collaboratives.

Contemporary researchers have suggested that in-group social capital is a precursor to organizational ownership, transformative behaviors, and higher-quality relationships between coworkers. The use of LMX as an additional theoretical frame enabled ‘further exploration of the relationship between leadership, learning environments, and grant implementation outcomes (Gerstner & Day, 1997). In short, the goal of this study was to investigate if the following leadership algorithm (see Figure 1) was apparent in the West GEAR UP TN collaboratives showing increases in college-going rates.

**Figure 1**

*TLT and LMX connection to research*

Detailing transformational leadership traits in the participants and focusing on the LMX between the principals, site coordinators, and their external stakeholders occurred to contribute to GEAR UP leadership literature.
GEAR UP TN is a state-level project for decreasing educational inequities and increasing college-going rates. This study contributed to the body of scholarship on principals’ and site coordinators’ leadership traits and relationships as they engage in their high schools and collaborative efforts with community stakeholders. The study had the following questions:

1. How do principals and site coordinators of GEAR UP TN communities define successful collaboration with nonprofits and higher education institutions?
2. What perceived principal and site coordinator leadership traits create effective engagement between community stakeholders and high schools?
3. What engagement practices were most often used in the collaboratives that increased college-going rates by five or more percentage points?

This research was also a means of building on the importance of leadership in the institution context (Chapman et al., 2008; Wright & Quick, 2022). The institutional context of “community, school district, and school” was important, as the components of the context either enabled or obstructed grant implementation. The four objectives of this work were to:

1. Contribute to the literature on using discretionary funding from the Higher Education Act to fulfill the promises of the Morrill Act.
2. Articulate the leadership best practices present in the GEAR UP TN communities with increases in college-going benchmarks.
3. Collect narratives and artifacts from groups of various stakeholders who worked collectively to address a community concern.
4. Contribute to the number of studies on efforts that utilize discretionary funding to address educational attainment.
Using the relationships gained through my THEC tenure, I sought to identify the GEAR UP TN leadership best practices for leveraging community resources to address complex social problems related to high school graduation, college-going, and retention rates. An abundance of research shows that ambiguous policy interpretations and structural oppression further complicate societal issues. Yet, success can and has occurred in various community groups’ collaborative efforts amid this unfortunate and persistent reality. In my 6 years with THEC, I witnessed principals and site coordinators help communities use research and local resources—especially nonprofits—to make significant gains in problem areas. The practical improvements resulted from the local leaders’ ability to use researched-based practices and community input. Cho and Gillespie (2006) found that identifying the predominant or significant characteristics of an effective government–nonprofit partnership is a way to increase human service quality and the organizations within the association. Thus, my academic and professional lives intersected to drive this inquiry of leadership theory and collective impact.

**Theoretical Perspective**

This study had a transformational theoretical perspective and included the TLT and LMX frameworks. As indicated by the Request for Proposals, successful grant implementation consists of transforming or increasing the college-going cultures of the LEAs and communities receiving GEAR UP TN funding.

**Transformational Leadership Theory**

Transformational leadership is a reciprocal leadership style in which the leader and the follower actively work to obtain greater motivation and morality (Burns, 1978). Korejan and Shahbazi (2016) described TLT outcomes as exchanges between leaders and followers that result in a greater good and positive motivational exchange. This leadership model focuses on the
relationship and not the hierarchal positions of leaders and followers (Bass, 1985). Burns (2003) explained this relationship includes “the possession of resources by those that hold power, as well as the interplay of the wants and needs, motives, values and capacities of both would-be leaders and their potential followers” (p. 16). The leader, the follower, and the mission they support indicate the impact of the relationships.

Korejan and Shahbazi (2016) described transformational leadership as an exchange between leaders and followers resulting in a greater good and positive motivational exchange. Transformational leadership is a way to explore leaders’ and followers’ affiliations, so both parties promote each other to higher standards and inspire constructive change (Burns, 2003). TLT aligns with the collective impact requirement for a shared agenda and measurement with reciprocal supportive activities, consistent engagement with support (Hanleybrown et al., 2012). The parallels between the theories are apparent in the following tenets of TLT: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. TLT and collective impact provided a foundation to explore the relationships between principals, site coordinators, and community stakeholders. LMX concepts facilitated the discovery of leadership best practices in the principals’ and site coordinators’ relationships.

**Leader-Member Exchange**

According to Gerstner and Day (1997), LMX indicates that the leader-follower relationship has diverse outcomes at varying investigation levels. The LMX theory focuses on the relationship between leaders and their subordinates, suggesting that leaders create in-group or out-group relationship styles based on the relationship characteristics (Aggarwal et al., 2020). In-group relationships include high degrees of communication, conviction, ability, a sense of
obligation, role clarity, and greater employee satisfaction. Such relationships also incorporate negotiated roles outside the scope of work described in the employee’s formal contract.

Out-group relationships differ due to the binding scope of the employees’ contracts. The out-group has lower engagement and employee satisfaction and more disengaged employee behavior, dissatisfaction, tension, and attrition (Lebrón et al., 2018; Martin et al., 2016; Northouse, 2013; Wang & Yi, 2011). Given the high need for stakeholder engagement in GEAR UP TN service implementation, this study focused on the in-group characteristics in the GEAR UP TN – West collaboratives. The informal characteristics of in-group dynamics produce a culture and climate optimal for engagement (Aggarwal et al., 2020). Wang and Ahmed (2003) described the informal structures as useful for transferring new knowledge inside and outside the organization.

**Research Design**

This qualitative study had a case study approach with cross-case analysis. Yin (2012) defined case studies as an “empirical inquiry about a contemporary phenomenon set within its real-world context—especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and the context are not evident” (p. 5). Case study research fits with “descriptive” or “explanatory” research (Yin, 2012, p. 6). Therefore, the case study design was an appropriate approach due to its focus on viewing particular situations within the context in which they occur (Bassey, 1999). Stake (2013) noted that studies within a bound system are most appropriate for a case study. In this qualitative study, interviews were the instrument used to describe the leadership and relationship traits of the principals and site coordinators involved in West GEAR UP TN 2012–2019 implementation.
Summary

This study contributed to the body of work on transformational leadership and collective impact in community collaborations via the LMX theory to address the relationship between principals and site coordinators. Moreover, this research presented the leadership traits useful for implementing GEAR UP activities and contributed to the communities’ capacity to address low college-going rates.

This study has five chapters. Chapter 1 provided an overview of the study, including an introduction to the literature and the study’s problem statement, research questions, significance, research design, and ethical considerations. Chapter 2 is a literature review on GEAR UP, GEAR UP TN, transformational leadership, and the LMX theory. Chapter 3 presents the methodology and case study design, Chapter 4 provides the findings of this qualitative study, and Chapter 5 includes recommendations for future research.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This chapter presents the historical context and educational policies that resulted in the establishment of GEAR UP TN. The Morrill Act of 1862, its reauthorization in 1890, the HEA, and GEAR UP are policies presented through a social construction framework to highlight the theme of educational policy implementation and leadership. The chapter also addresses TLT and LMX, the 'theoretical frameworks for the research design presented in Chapter 3. This literature review presents individualized consideration, idealized influence, inspirational motivation, empowerment, and intellectual stimulation as the essential concepts of transformational leadership. Due to the perceived importance of relationships for GEAR UP TN implementation, this study used the LMX concepts of in-group and out-group. This literature review has three sections: educational policies, leadership theories, and organizational culture.

A Note to the Reader: Framing the Era

The upcoming policy overviews provide historical references to 'federal or state educational policies, specifically the public focus of elected officials according to archived speeches or legislation and not the conditions of those impacted by the approved bills. Chapter 2 includes brief but essential references to the state of marginalized communities in the United States during the referenced policy implementation, including mention of historical references of 'the narratives of the people impacted or influenced by policies and policymakers (Davidson, 2017; Nidiffer, 1999; Wheatle, 2019).

Higher Educational Policy Background

The importance of education for American advancement dates back to the 1700s. The first federally documented investment of higher education occurred after the Revolutionary War.
The original 13 states donated land east of the borders to settle the debt accrued during the war, leading to the Northwest Territories Act of 1787. This act was the methodology used to enter new states into the Union and define the boundaries of the Northwest territories. Moreover, the Northwest Territories Act of 1787 indicated that new territories could allot two townships, roughly 70 miles, for higher education institutions (Cervantes et al., 2005). The dedication of land for higher education institutions continued with the 1803 seminary land grant and expanded with the Morrill Act of 1862.

**The Morrill Act of 1862 and The Morrill Act of 1890**

As a founding member of the Republican Party, Senator Justin Smith Morrill proposed federal allocations to start public institutions of higher education. In 1856, 3 months after taking his position in the House of Representatives, Morrill proposed the “people’s college” notion to Congress (LaMay, 2001). Although initially rejected, Morrill reintroduced the concept in 1857 to generate revenue for states. After defending the bill twice, lawmakers passed the bill in the House on April 20, 1858, and in the Senate on February 7, 1859. Senator Morrill postulated that farmers and mechanics, the working class, needed to learn techniques to become more efficient. Morrill based his notions on European workmen colleges and the endowment proposals of Jonathan Baldwin Turner (Wheatle, 2019). Ultimately, Morrill intended the Act to produce higher learning institutions in 34 U.S. states.

The goal of higher education institutions was to increase educational access to rural Americans, specifically farmers. At the onset of Senator Morrill’s tenure, 80% of Americans lived outside of city centers; of that percentage, 60% were farmers (LaMay, 2001). The Morrill Act of 1862 was an example of the missteps in educational policy implementation. Based on Brand’s (2015) notion of equity as a “relational concept [that] prioritizes the needs of those who
are less favored by present conditions” (p. 250), there were problems with implementation during the transfer of the resources. Federal government officials intended state leaders to use the resources to encourage the educational pursuits of the lower-economic classes. However, state government officials utilized the funds according to their perceived needs and did not necessarily address the federal government’s intention. During this time, only elite, well-off White men had access to postsecondary education (LaMay, 2001; Rose, 2017; Sorber, 2018). Morrill, influenced by his family’s inability to pay for his college education, disagreed with this position and believed educating the general public would result in a more efficient U.S. economy.

The federal government identified the need for a policy to increase educational attainment; however, lawmakers did not develop a standardized implementation method to address racially biased policies of admission (Cervantes et al., 2005). The ratification of the Morrill Act in 1890 was a means to address this concern (Gavazzi & Gee, 2018; Mack & Stolarick, 2014). The allocation of resources to policy without a concrete focus on using the resources was a shortcoming of the policy implementation. In addition to squandering public resources, this resulted in citizens’ increased distrust of their elected officials (Viennet & Pont, 2017). The allocation of resources also shows that the United States had a structure of education federalism to prioritize the states and limit the federal government’s interference. Many years later, scholars such as Robinson (2013) illustrated how educational federalism enables and contributes to the inequities in educational access. Although the federal government could not interfere with the Morrill Act of 1865, in the 1890 ratification, lawmakers attached federal funding to the act’s goal to increase accessibility to higher education (Rose, 2017). The Morrill Act of 1890 stated in part,
No money shall be paid out under this Act to any State or Territory for the support and maintenance of a college where a distinction of race or color is made in the admission of students, but the establishment and maintenance of such colleges separately for white and colored students shall be held to be in compliance with the provisions of this Act is the funds received in such State or Territory be equally divided. (Second Morrill Act 1890, U.S.C 322)

The Morrill Act of 1890 provided additional fiscal provisions that further enabled the “separate but equal” educational philosophy for land grant institutions, now known as HBCUs (Gavazzi & Gordon Gee, 2018; Rose, 2017). The *Plessy v. Ferguson* ruling of that period was a later means of cementing the “separate but equal” philosophy.

**Framing the Era**

Authors have commonly referred to land grant institutions as people’s institutions (Mack & Stolarick, 2014). However, this term does not address the wealthy, elite, White men to whom the reference applies (McDowell, 2003). Numerous scholars have presented the Morrill Act as a bill of rights with legislative advancements for safeguarding religious freedom and prohibiting slavery in newly established territories (Dubb, 2007; Gavazzi & Gee, 2018; Mack & Stolarick, 2014). This view is only part of the narrative, as the creation of land grant institutions was only possible due to the slaughter, manipulation, hanging, and burning of many Native Americans (Brayboy & Tachine, 2021). Clear examples of the transfer of indigenous people’s land for settlers gain’ include the checkerboard settlement following the theft of the land of the Nez Perce tribe of Ohio (Anhtone & Lee, 2020; Nez Pierce Tribe, 2018), the incarceration of 10,000 Navajos in Arizona, and the murders of Cheyenne and Arapaho groups for the advancement of the Morrill Act, Homestead Act, and the Pacific Railroad Acts (Landry, 2020).
The Higher Education Act of 1965

The HEA (89-329) included provisions for students and institutions of higher learning. The Act was a renewed commitment to improving access to higher education and was the first significant higher education legislation since the Morrill Act of 1890. The HEA contained eight titles, or sections, which addressed the challenges of equality in education. Table 1 presents the titles and their purposes to show the various resources used to impact education and increase accessibility. In addition to supporting students to prepare for college, this legislation provided funding through Title IV to prepare traditionally under resourced students for postsecondary education.

**Table 1**

*Titles of the Higher Education Act*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Provides resources for</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Title I: Strengthening Community Service Programs</td>
<td>Extension and continuing education programs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Title II: Assistance for Libraries</td>
<td>Library collection enhancements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Title III: Developing Institutions</td>
<td>Strengthening developing institutions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Title IV: Student Assistance Act</td>
<td>Student assistance through scholarships, work-study programs, and low-interest loans.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Title V: Teacher Corps</td>
<td>Improved the quality of teaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Title VI: Undergraduate Instruction</td>
<td>Improved undergraduate instruction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Title VII: Higher Education Facilities</td>
<td>Graduate and postsecondary improvement programs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Title VIII: Additional Programs</td>
<td>Additional Programs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The HEA has continued through changes in political administrations, economic environments, and social movements. The HEA remains a constant construct and symbol of the U.S. government’s attempt to increase education equality (Keppel, 1987). The initial purpose of
the Act was to provide financial resources for students’ self-sufficiency and degree attainment. Through various political administrations, lawmakers have expanded the focus to include subsidizing students’ education through loans. This study focused on the Title IV Student Assistance Act that provided authorization for the college preparatory initiatives of TRIO Programs, including Upward Bound, Talent Search, student support services programs, and, in the years to follow, GEAR UP.

GEAR UP

By 1992, the federal government had provided numerous grant opportunities and the NEISP. The purpose of the grants was to provide students from lower economic areas with early postsecondary support (State Grant Programs, 1999). Less than a decade later, President Clinton allocated $140 million to increase mentorship programs to connect middle and high school students with higher education adults. In introductory remarks on High Hopes Partnerships and the allocation, President Clinton described his experience of growing up with a family who expected him to go to college even though none of his family had ever attended college. Clinton also spoke of Representative Chakka Fattah’s mother’s stance that school was the only option outside of death for her children. The allocation enabled the High Hopes for College initiative to prepare mentors to serve as secondary education guides for students. The mentors encouraged students to choose challenging courses and attend tutoring services and assisted families in understanding the funds needed for students to attend college. This initiative notably included “300 college presidents and more than 50 major education, religious, civil rights and service groups who have embraced this initiative” (High Hopes, Congressional Archives, 1998). Across the Republican and Democratic parties, this collaboration was an effort to provide all children...
with structured support to help them transition from high school to college. This structure was
the foundation for the required services that ultimately resulted in GEAR UP.

In 1998, legislators replaced the NEISP with GEAR UP. The GEAR UP legislation was a
means of continuing the NEISP’s legacy by providing precollege interventions and scholarship
opportunities for students in high-poverty areas (U.S. Department of Education, 2000). The goals
of GEAR UP are to:

1. Increase the academic performance and preparation for the postsecondary education
   of GEAR UP students.

2. Increase the rate of high school graduation and participation in postsecondary
   education of GEAR UP students.

3. Increase GEAR UP students’ and their families’ knowledge of postsecondary
   education options, preparation, and financing. (p. #)

To date, GEAR UP has provided services to approximately 523,000 students and 3,208
secondary schools in 46 states (Edpartnership, 2021). GEAR UP eligibility depends on whether
at least 50% of the schools’ populations receive free and reduced lunch. GEAR UP provides
comprehensive direct services to parents, students, and school staff (i.e., teachers, principals, and
counselors). The school staff direct services include professional development for ACT
strategies, college-going classroom activities, local industry information, STEM support,
scholarship boot camps, and financial aid workshops. Direct student support includes tutoring,
mentoring, STEM boot camps, ACT workshops, campus visits, and additional college access
adult support. As a strategy to increase students’ enrollment in rigorous courses, GEAR UP staff
encourage students to enroll and inform their families of the benefits for students. School leaders
can use GEAR UP funds to cover the cost of enrichment materials, lab resources, and assessment
fees. Additionally, GEAR UP can cover dual-enrollment or joint enrollment costs at schools that do not provide students’ desired advanced courses. Dual-enrollment is a concept in which a high school student simultaneously enrolls in high school and a postsecondary institution to receive credit and grades at each. Joint enrollment occurs when a student enrolls in high school and college and completes coursework captured only at the postsecondary institution (State of Tennessee, 2021). GEAR UP services are means of informing schools’ college-going cultures while acknowledging that the individuals providing the services are the content experts. Defining a thriving college-going culture is by the number of students who enroll in postsecondary school after graduating from high school.

**Framing the Era**

Significant gains in higher education degree attainment occurred between 1970 and the early 1990s (Anyon, 2014). During this period, the President’s Scientific Advisory Committee on Science Education suggested increasing funds to predominantly Black institutions. The suggestion resulted in an increased focus but a decrease in funding of Title III allocations. This time also included an increase in the number of federal loans provided to students and the wage gap between Blacks and Whites (Anyon, 2014; Keppel, 1987).

**GEAR UP TN**

In September 2005, Tennessee received $3.5 million in Title IV funding to implement GEAR UP TN. The grant allocated sub-awards to nine rural counties and services to 47 middle and high schools across the state. The grant also enabled direct partnerships between the THEC and the LEAs and the prescribed best practices in exchange for resources for traditionally underserved students and families (GEARUP TN, 2020). Under resourced students traditionally have college-going rates lower than the state average, and more than 50% of this student
population receives free and reduced lunches. Per the federal requirement, the best practices mirrored national goals, objectives, and required services. The district had flexibility in implementing the services, such as the required tutoring. Tutoring services could range from one-on-one afterschool instruction to weekend ACT workshops. The grant indicates the best practice of tutoring, but the LEAs’ determine and justify the implementation’. This flexibility shows the significance of the leadership and relationships between the participating parties. A 2008 Vanderbilt study suggested ’developing a GEAR UP TN guide for leaders to address the gaps in the district implementation knowledge of coordinators and principals (Chapman et al., 2008).

The objectives of GEAR UP TN 2012 were to:

1. Increase student academic achievement and course completion.
2. Increase student performance on college entrance exams.
3. Increase student high school graduation rates.
4. Increase student postsecondary participation and success.
5. Increase student and family educational expectations.
6. Increase student and family knowledge of and access to financial assistance for postsecondary education.
7. Increase parent and community engagement in activities associated with student preparation for college.
8. Increase educator knowledge and understanding of postsecondary access and success.

This study was a means of investigating the TLT’s and LMX theory’s ability to produce systems of cooperation between internal and external stakeholders to increase college-going rates among the selected collaboratives.
Significance of Educational Policy: Summary

Singh (2011) noted, that in higher education policy, discrepancies present as varied groups of stakeholders interpret and determine the social justice constructs and equitable norms needed to align with the political agendas. Since the Northwest Territories Act of 1787, the government has allocated federal funds to educating Americans (Finkelman, 1986). The passage of the Morrill Act of 1862 and its ratification in 1890 continued this tradition. The legacy of federal attempts to improve U.S. citizens’ educational attainment includes many of the programs and reauthorizations of the HEA. The March 27, 2020, passage of The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act was a more recent attempt to continue this legacy. History has shown not only the federal government’s attempts to increase educational attainment but its legacy of policy implementation missteps. The background of the present study focused on the failure of public policies to produce the objective of decreasing inequities (see Ingram et al., 2007). The social construction framework addressed this policy implementation misstep via the distribution of benefits and punishments. The impact of policy change is apparent in the social construction and influence of the impacted groups (Sabatier & Weible, 2014). The framework is a way to identify the individuals who benefit from the policy (i.e., elite White men) versus those intended to receive the support (i.e., farmers and Blacks). Sabatier and Weible (2014) indicated that, once made, a construction often continues to exist, supported by law. The Morrill Act presented the notion of legalizing requiring separate educational facilities for Blacks, a concept reintroduced decades later in Plessy v Ferguson.

Despite the pattern and persistence of social constructions, educational gains have occurred through policy implementation. Hudson (2019) noted that successful policy implementation is not a result of isolated capability but a convoluted system. Innovative policy
implementation is the responsibility of any leaders who accept federal funding (Aarons et al., 2014). Leaders influence agencies’ ability to implement innovations (Michaelis et al., 2010) and are critical contributors to the environments of the given agencies (Gumusluoglu & Ilsev, 2009). Aaron et al. (2014) noted that the aforementioned reasons indicate the need to explore leadership related to best practices implementation.

**Transformational Leadership**

In 1978, Burns produced a revolutionary work and framed the concept of leadership for decades to come. Burns (1978) described two leadership behaviors: transactional and transformational. Although the present study focused on transformational leadership, understanding transactional leadership is a way to clarify the rationale of the study. Transactional leadership consists of interacting to exchange goods or services (Stewart, 2006). The interaction occurs based on leaders’ ability to understand their followers’ motivations and settle on the terms of the exchange. Specifically, the exchange is a means of fulfilling the followers’ needs and the leaders’ demands (Brown et al., 2020). There are three types of transactional leadership: laissez-faire, management by exception (MbE; active or passive), and contingent reward. Laissez-faire leadership is inactive leadership or the relinquishment of leadership responsibility. MbE is a problem-centric approach in that leaders focus on actual or potential problems (Bass et al., 2003; Howell & Hall-Merenda, 1999). MbE leaders monitor policies and procedure implementation to reduce employee mistakes. Active MbE leaders continuously engage employees to ensure they follow the rules, whereas passive MbE leaders engage as problems present. Lastly, contingent reward leaders use tangible and intangible items to encourage employee behaviors. Although transactional leadership is the most common type (Washington, 2007), it is not the most effective approach for sustaining desired behaviors (Brown et al., 2020). Due to its focus on exchanges,
transactional leadership is the enforcement of objectives by the leader. Although focused on a set of agreed-up actions, the goal of GEAR UP grant-funded projects is to change P–16 systems and empower a targeted group of students with the skills, knowledge, and attributes they need for increased postsecondary attainment. The fundamental intent to empower and mobilize participants around a common goal (increased postsecondary attainment) was the rationale for the use of TLT in this study.

Stewart (2006) presented leadership as a significant focus in the culpability and restructuring of schools and school systems. Transformational leadership is a shared leadership style in which the leader and the follower actively work to obtain greater motivation and morality (Burns, 1978). This leadership model focuses on the relationship and not the hierarchal positions of leaders and followers (Bass, 1985). The reciprocity of the relationship exists among the leader, the follower, and the mission they support. Burns (1978) wrote that a transformational leader “raises the level of human conduct and ethical aspiration of both the leader and the led, and thus it has a transforming effect on both” (p. 20). Transformational leadership has an embedded focus on social change via relationships and resources. Therefore, transformational leadership is a suitable approach for assisting organizations in pursuing change (Lussier & Achua, 2010). Burns explained that the leadership relationship includes “the possession of resources by those that hold power, as well as the interplay of the wants and needs, motives and values and capacities of both would-be leaders and their potential followers” (p. 16). Significant to this study and the use of transformational leadership is TLT’s focus on addressing societal ills such as poverty (Stewart, 2006).
Components of the Theory

Transformational leadership consists of four components: individualized consideration, idealized influence (charisma), inspirational motivation, and intellectual stimulation (Brown et al., 2020; Judge & Piccolo, 2004). Bass and Riggio (2006) identified individualized consideration as the leader’s ability to cater to growth opportunities and acknowledge individual motivations. According to the authors, idealized influence includes the leader’s actions and the follower’s perceptions of the leader’s behavior. Leaders use inspirational motivation to cast a positive vision for the agency and its team. Intellectual stimulation is a method for inspiring innovative problem-solving and novel approaches to mundane tasks or circumstances.

Northouse (2013) expanded the components of transformational leadership to include empowerment, the process of promoting independence and interdependence among followers. Empowerment is also a means of fostering followers’ self-efficacy to handle barriers or complicated circumstances. Leaders who can empower their followers provide the stakeholders of a learning organization or an agency with the capacity to reorganize and develop innovative methods to acclimate to challenges (Donate & Guadamilles, 2011; Rijal, 2009). Empowering employees is a way to increase employee satisfaction and facilitate the relationship between transformational leadership and employee fulfillment (Choi et al., 2016; Trottier et al., 2008).

Contrary to the significance of empowerment, in theory, Bass and Riggio (2006) argued that this component of transformational leadership has also received criticism (Turner, 2018). According to the authors, empowerment is a component limited by the alignment of the followers’ goals with the leader. Empowered followers who do not align with the leader’s goals may disrupt goal attainment. Bass and Riggio also noted that empowerment could produce strict rules that obstruct the agency’s and followers’ resourcefulness (Turner, 2018).
In this study, the components of TLT were the means used to develop the semistructured interview question used to investigate the participants’ leadership styles. Whereas the TLT (Burns, 1978) accounts for exchanges in relationships, it is a theory limited to material exchanges for goods or services. To account for the exchanges associated with employee empowerment, job satisfaction, and outcomes, this study’s theoretical framework included the LMX theory.

**Leader-Member Exchange Theory and Transformational Leadership Theory**

The LMX is a theory for focusing leadership not on the persons involved but on the “interaction” between parties (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). According to Turner (2018), LMX has been described as a perfect complement to transformational leadership because of its support for the autonomous nature of academic faculty and its ability to create social capital, act as an antecedent to organizational citizenship and transformative behaviors and promote higher-quality relationships between coworkers. Leaders who want to inspire others to participate in the transformation of (higher education) must have a good understanding of LMX Theory and its benefits. Likewise, they must be aware of its criticisms in order to avoid what some have described as potential flaws in LMX theory as a guide for effective leadership. (p. 21)

The LMX theory is an effective approach for facilitating organizational change (Arif et al., 2017). While all the attributes of the LMX theory have significance, this study focused on LMX as a means of creating social capital through social exchanges to promote favorable working environments (Erdogan & Enders, 2007; Lee et al., 2019) and GEAR UP TN college-going cultures. Discussions of LMX theory have focused on the roles of leaders and their followers (Martin et al., 2010). The LMX theory has two categories for group interactions: in-
group and out-group (Herrera et al., 2013). In-group relationships include negotiated role responsibilities and informal interactions, whereas out-group relationships occur based on employment contracts. The informal relational structure of the in-group is a vital contributor to information sharing within an organization (Wang & Ahmed, 2003). Information sharing is a significant strategy for endorsing cultural development. The endorsement of culture is a way to mediate Bass and Riggio’s (2006) concern of follower and leader alignment. Moreover, Donate and Guadamilles (2011) indicated the need for culture and leadership to produce creative activities.

The perceived benefit of transformational leadership and group interactions is their documented influence on organizational culture, knowledge-sharing, and creativity. Traits, as I have observed during my time as a GEAR UP TN regional coordinator, are necessities for successful grant implementation. The standardized nature of GEAR UP TN and fostering the above traits require in-group dynamics. In-group dynamics were the focus of Research Question 3 (What engagement practices were most often used in collaboratives that increased college-going rates by five or more percentage points?) and Research Question 2 (What perceived principal and site coordinator leadership traits create effective engagement between community stakeholders and high schools?). Additionally, the study focused on the impact of transformational leadership within the educational and community environment.

**Summary**

This chapter provided a historical timeline and the missteps of the educational policies that led to GEAR UP and GEAR UP TN. The chapter also presented the concept of leadership as an influential determinant of policy implementation. The chapter then addressed the TLT and
LMX theories as influences of successful policy implementation. Chapter 3 provides an overview of the methods and procedures used for this study.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The goal of this qualitative case study was to identify the leadership and relationship traits of the principals and site coordinators involved in the GEAR UP TN 2012–2019 implementation. This chapter presents the study’s method, participant demographics, research procedures, strategies of inquiry, ethical considerations, data collection procedures, and analysis methods.

Research Methodology and Design

This study’s theoretical frameworks were the TLT and LMX theory. The case study approach was appropriate to identify the leadership and relationship traits of the principals and site coordinators involved in the GEAR UP TN 2012–2019 implementation. External evaluators conducted formative evaluations during the grant implementation cycle to assess activity outputs for each participating county or collaborative (Cobro Consulting, 2018). By August 2020, the external evaluators provided a summative assessment focused on the collaboratives and the cumulative outcomes of the 2012–2019 GEAR UP TN grant (Cobro Consulting, 2020). Neither the formative nor summative reports provided information about the site coordinators’ and principals’ leadership, the systems in which they operated, or the relationship between the two. The reports presented student outcomes without consideration of the leadership and relational requirements needed to obtain the desired results. Before 2008, the site coordinators and principal positions of GEAR UP TN underwent investigation to better understand district performance, job knowledge, implementation hurdles, human and institutional capacity, the impact of program communications, and the decision-making of the program’s participants (Chapman et al., 2008).
The summative and formative reports from Cobro provided the findings of the GEAR UP TN grant’s experimental design. The reports lent insight into P–16 data, such as ACT assessment scores and college-going programming rates of participation, enrollment, and persistence. However, the reports did not include data from interviews, analyses of artifacts, or observations of the persons charged with implementation. Interviews, analyses of artifacts, and participant observations of the 2012–2019 GEAR UP TN grant cycle could provide significant data useful for determining the behavioral characteristics of the persons charged with implementing the services. The aforementioned are topics worthy of exploration, particularly as few studies have focused on the role of leadership in grant implementation and its impact on college-going rates. The GEAR UP TN 2012–2019 data analysis showed that 14 of the 19 West GEAR UP TN collaboratives had higher college-going rates than similarly situated schools. As such, the qualitative explanatory multi-case approach was the most appropriate design for this study because it provided the opportunity to review the phenomenon within the community’s context and connect grant implementation with grant outcomes (Yin, 2003).

According to Baxter and Jack (2008), case study research is an appropriate methodology for (a) determining the means and rationale of an occurrence, (b) exploring context without the ability to influence the conduct of the participants, (c) exploring the context in which the event is situated, and (d) exploring ambiguous points of connection between the occurrence and the context. Therefore, the case study design is suitable for examining circumstances within their actual contexts (Adelma et al., 1980; Yin, 1994). When reviewing GEAR UP TN leadership traits, the LEA administration, school, and community form the context for project implementation (Chapman et al., 2008). Additionally, Chapman et al. (2008) referenced the site coordinator as a center point of connection in the GEAR UP TN implementation framework.
Understanding the site coordinator’s position requires “a perspective…that acknowledges the institutional contexts within which the program and the actor reside” (Chapman et al., 2008, p. 5). Thus, understanding the participants within the context of their interactions and environments was a critical step in addressing the following research questions: How do GEAR UP TN principals and site coordinators define successful collaboration with nonprofits and higher education institutions? and What principal and site coordinator leadership traits create effective engagement between community stakeholders and high schools?

**Population and Sample**

The population often indicates demographic information; however, the fluid nature of the definition of population enables the inclusion of individuals who share common traits or experiences (Banerjee & Chaudhury, 2010). The common feature among the selected participants was their role in the GEAR UP TN implementation. Goetz and LeCompte (1984) emphasized that study participants are key informants. Due to their years of service and leadership experiences, the participants in this study were critical informants chosen purposefully for this research. This study’s participants represented three counties in Western Tennessee with different demographics but the common trait of increased college-going rates. The selected site coordinators and principals answered questions only about their roles in the GEAR UP TN 2012–2019 implementation to ensure this study’s feasibility. The binding of time and position limited the possibility of focusing on too many topics and narrowed the focus of this study (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

**Demographic and Geographic Information**

In 2012, GEAR UP TN provided 15 subgrants to the winning counties of a statewide grant competition. Of the 15 subgrants, eight were West Tennessee collaboratives.
Collaboratives are teams consisting of the district and school administrators and community agencies directly or indirectly responsible for the grant implementation’s required services and activities (Cobro, 2020; GEAR UP TN, 2012). This qualitative study focused on three West Tennessee collaboratives, one of which had two sites. As defined in this study, sites were the locations of the grant implementation. In this study, the location was a trait further defined as urban intensive, urban emergent, or urban characteristic (Milner, 2012). Selecting the targeted collaboratives and sites occurred based on the college-going rates that resulted from the grant’s implementation. This chapter presents the demographic information in the study setting section.
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>County I</td>
<td>Site A</td>
<td>38.4%</td>
<td>48.3%</td>
<td>49.5%</td>
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<td>County I</td>
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<td>n/a</td>
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<td>Collaborative III</td>
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<td>71.2%</td>
<td>17.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Sample and Sampling

This multisite case study provided greater insight into the leadership characteristics that resulted in increased or decreased college-going rates in the selected West Tennessee collaboratives. During this stage of the research, the sample allowed for obtaining information and representation. A population is a group of people with common traits, and the sample is a smaller subset of the larger group (Banerjee & Chaudhury, 2010). In this study, criterion sampling was the primary method of recruiting participants for data collection. Criterion sampling established the requirements, GEAR UP staff, CGR, 2012-2019, for study’s participants. In criterion sampling, variables are selected that meet a determined set of conditions or terms, to safeguard the characteristics of the study (Omana, J, 2013).

An additional sampling method, convenience sampling, also occurred due to participant accessibility. Accessibility is a trait primarily indicated by the relationship between the researcher and the participants (Andrade, 2021). Convenience sampling was an appropriate approach because of the relationship between the researcher (me) and the GEAR UP TN site coordinators and principals. This study had a predetermined sample size. The development of the selection criteria occurred based on the college-going rates of the collaboratives at the end of the GEAR UP TN 2012–2019 grant. The sample included only the site coordinators, principals, and district administrators of the respective counties.

The target participants were the principals, site coordinators, and district administrators of LEAs in three Southwest counties in the Southeast United States. The goal was to conduct virtual interviews with four principals, four site coordinators, and four district administrators. Each participant category indicated the data collection and the interview questions. The different participant positions and relationships provided for a richer analysis with great gravity.
Table 3

Participant Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>County code</th>
<th>Participant code</th>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Setting</th>
<th>Primary setting</th>
<th>Title/role</th>
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Study Setting

The study’s setting included an intermediary organization (IO) that provided three LEAs with funds to increase their college-going rates. According to Honig (2004),

Intermediaries are organizations that occupy the space in between at least two other parties. Intermediary organizations primarily function to mediate or to manage change in both those parties. Intermediary organizations operate independently of these two parties and provide distinct value beyond what the parties alone would be able to develop or to amass by themselves. At the same time, intermediary organizations depend on those parties to perform their essential functions. (p. 67)

The IO in this study was the governing body of all colleges in the state. The goals of the IO were to develop and implement policy, assess policy implementation, regulate colleges and universities, assess programs of study, provide financial assistance to students and higher education institutions, and, most significantly for this study, create seamless educational P–16
pathways for students. Evidence of the ability of the GEAR UP TN to produce these pathways for increased college-going rates occurred among the collaboratives selected for this study.

**County 1, Collaborative 1**

County 1 was the largest collaborative in the state under study. The county was ranked eighth in educational attainment in the state. The county’s largest city has a warehouse economy where many individuals can earn living wages without certifications, degrees, or advanced degrees. To that point, a 2020 profile report from THEC found that only 38.6% of the county’s residents held an Associate of Arts, and only 31.8% of the county’s population aged 25 to 64 had a Bachelor of Arts. A potential consequence of the low educational attainment is the poverty rate of the largest city.

In 2017, a University of Memphis poverty study found that the city was one of the highest-ranking in the country for childhood poverty. According to the Federal Reserve Bank, the county had an unemployment rate of 3.6%, slightly higher than the state’s average of 3.5%. The per capita market income for the county was $47,655. The county has a complicated economic narrative because it is a warehouse economy. The economic engine of the warehouse enables the employer to seemingly pay living wages without the benefits of full-time employment.

The study’s participants worked in the largest city in the county. The county included one of the highest poverty areas in the country. Additionally, U.S. Census data showed that single-parent households with children comprised 47.09% of the population of the county’s largest city. The county’s most significant university report on poverty found that the city had one of the nation’s poorest MSA overall (Poverty Fact Sheet, 2020). The targeted LEA of this study was the largest of seven districts for the county and included the district of interest.
**Population Diversity**

According to 2019 U.S. Census data, 41% of the population is White, 54% is Black, 7% is Hispanic or Latino, and 2% are individuals of Asian descent. In 2018, single-parent households comprised 41% of households with children. The study’s participants worked in the two cities within the county.

**County 2, Collaborative 2**

**Education**

County 2 is the second-largest county in the state and in the state’s southernmost region. The county is home to 16,673 residents and has three cities. The county has two elementary schools, two middle schools, three high schools, and two higher education institutions. In 2019, the county had a high school graduation rate of 94%. The county also has a college-going rate (62.8%) and first-time freshmen TELS recipient rate (73.7%) higher than the state’s rates. The county’s 2019 graduating students favored community colleges and technical schools over 4-year institutions. According to the THEC 2020 Higher Education County Profile, of the adults aged 25 to 64, 83.8% had high school diplomas, 20.2% had some college but no degrees, 16% had associate’s degrees, and 9.9% had a bachelor’s degrees.

**Socioeconomic Profile**

County 2 has a poverty rate of 18% and an unemployment rate of 7.3%. Of the 16,673 residents, 9,231 are adults aged 25 to 64 (THEC, 2020). The county has a median household income of $41,427. In 2018, the county had 208 employers.
Population Diversity

According to 2019 U.S. Census data, 91% of the population is White, 7% is Black, and 2% is Hispanic or Latino. Population outliers include individuals of mixed race or Asian descent. In 2018, single-parent households with children comprised 29.3% of the population. The study’s participants worked within each of the three cities within the county.

County 3

Education

County 3 is the fifth-largest county in the state and in the state’s southwest region. The county is home to 25,050 residents and has two cities, six elementary schools, one middle school, two high schools, and one alternative education center for Grades 7–12. In 2019, the county had a high school graduation rate of 82.2%. The county also has a college-going rate (55.1%) and first-time freshmen TELS recipient rate (58%) lower than the state’s rates. The county’s 2019 graduating students favored 4-year higher education institutions over community colleges and technical schools. According to the THEC 2020 Higher Education County Profile, of the adults aged 25 to 64 in the county, 81.9% had high school diplomas, 17.2% had some college but no degree, 15.5% had associate’s degrees, and 10.4% had bachelor’s degrees.

Socioeconomic Profile

The county has a poverty rate of 17.80% and an unemployment rate of 11.8%. Of the 25,050 residents, 13,699 are adults aged 25 to 64 (THEC, 2020). The county has a median household income of $40,304. In 2018, the county had 208 employers.
children comprised 41% of the population. The study’s participants worked within each of the three cities within the county.

**Procedure**

This study commenced with a qualitative triangulation method and multiple approaches for collecting data and preparing for the interviews. The interviews provided data to inform the research. The purpose of the interviews was to obtain information on participant leadership and site coordinator-principal relationships. This study occurred by collecting data from the participants through interviews and an examination of artifacts. The participants received consent forms before their interviews. The consent forms presented the study’s title, the location of the interviews, the name of the committee chair, the purpose of the study, the number of participants, the benefits of the research, any associated risks, the interview process, and the rights of participants. All the participants signed the form to acknowledge they had reviewed the document and consented to their interviews.

Due to COVID-19, all the interviews occurred via phone or video conferencing. After obtaining participant consent, the recorded interviews commenced. A secured drive was the tool used to save the interview recordings. Collecting this information provided the opportunity to understand the problem and detail the setting (Clancey, 1986). Participant feedback was a critical means of confirming the problem statement. While a preliminary review of research presented an idea of the problem, there was no way to ascertain the problem statement without the individuals who defined the problem. Abbott (2006) informed that researchers are always able to see the concern prior to it being a concern and are often less likely to know a solution. He continues that both activities are often completed in tandem.
**Data Collection**

**Sampling**

Nonrandom purposeful sampling (Creswell & Creswell, 2013) was the method used to recruit participants for the interviews. The individuals interviewed in this study had roles in the implementation of the GEAR UP TN and had established relationships with me, the researcher. The participants for this study represented three GEAR UP TN collaboratives in West Tennessee.

This study entailed collecting data from four site coordinators, four principals, and four district administrators (retired or current) via interviews. The interview results indicated the leadership traits associated with successful GEAR UP implementation. Creswell and Creswell (2013) explained that qualitative research “begins with an assumption and the use of interpretive theoretical frameworks that inform the study of research problems addressing the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (p. 44). Their responses allowed me to virtually explore the leadership traits of the GEAR UP TN site coordinators and principals.

Typical data collection instruments include observations by the researcher and the participants, interviews, existing documents, and records or artifacts. According to Yin (2003), varied informational sources do not lack significance; instead, they are complementary and provide different sources of support. The materials employed for this study included interviews, observations, and artifacts. A review of GEAR UP TN 2012 grant implementation artifacts, including state-level data and program implementation resources, informed the research and interview questions for the four principals, four site coordinators, and four district administrators.
**Semistructured Interviews**

Baden and Major (2013) described interviews as a key component of qualitative research. An interview is a discussion between two persons in which one person asks questions and the other responds. Tierney and Dilley (2002) provided insight into the purpose of interviews, identifying four objectives for interviews in education: the reformation of educational practices, development of case studies, explanation of strategies within a particular educational structure, and an understanding of the environment in which learning occurs.

Case study research provided the flexibility needed for a semistructured interview strategy, allowing the environmental context and the relationships to be part of the interviews. The interview strategy was not a means of excluding situations from the individual or individuals from situations. The research included one set of questions for the principals and a different but related set of questions for the site coordinators. The goal of interviews with the GEAR UP TN principals, site coordinators, and district administrators was to document the leadership factors and engagement experiences that resulted in the reported or perceived success benchmarks of each phase of the project. Nonrandom purposeful sampling (Creswell & Creswell, 2013) produced the interview participants. The selection of the individuals interviewed occurred based on their GEAR UP TN roles and their established relationships with the researcher. Data collection occurred with virtual interviews via Zoom or Microsoft Teams. The collective responses showed the best practices for service, activity implementation, and community engagement.

**Data Analysis**

Exhaustive data analysis occurred with the practices of manual coding and memoing using a phased coding process. First-cycle coding consisted of conducting and coding interviews
and recoding the discussions after subsequent interviews. The first codes were broken into elemental methods, one of Saldaña’s (2016) seven categories, and analyzed using in vivo coding. Second-cycle coding followed to reorganize the first coding cycle. The objective of second-cycle coding is “to create a categorical, thematic, conceptual and theoretical organization from your array of 1st cycle codes” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 234). Using Saldaña’s framework, the following steps occurred in this study:

1. Transcript analysis: Transcripts reviewed, and first impressions consolidated into words or brief statements representative of the interviewees’ statements.
2. Pattern recognition: Patterns identified for the creation of categories of similar codes.
3. Creation of themes: The categories reviewed for the creation of themes.
4. Theme groups: Similar themes grouped together.
5. Interviewee meaning: Through reflections, themed groups reviewed to define the statements of the themes and decrease the number of groups.
6. Second cycle of coding: Connections between the codes, categories, and themes discovered through the use of in vivo coding.
7. Description: Data summarized, and a descriptive narrative produced.

The creation of categories or units of data occurred after finding codes and themes. Thematic analysis was a means to uncover critical factors and experiences from the categories. The organization of the information occurred with analytic memoing to document understandings, patterns, and concepts in the data (Rogers, 2018). According to Tie et al. (2019), memos are a paper trail of the written ideas or occurrences that emerge throughout the research process. Memos created after the participant interviews included the researcher’s cognitive and emotional responses to the research.
Throughout the memo creation and additional data collection, a continuous review of the information occurred through constant comparative analysis, the procedure for coding and categorizing data (Chun et al., 2019). Specifically, constant comparative analysis is an in-depth review of collected contextual data for connections and discrepancies (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Each association or distinction is a code, and similar codes result in categories. Comparing the categories is a means to exhaust the data so no new findings emerge. The application of the exhausted data occurs against abductive reasoning, comparing data points to determine the “fit” of the new information with the previously collected information. Comparing the codes and categories and exhausting the findings produced conceptualizations focused on the interview themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1994).

Summary

In this qualitative study, interviews were the instrument used to investigate transformational leadership and LMX traits in the GEAR UP TN site coordinators and principals. Chapter 3 provided information on the case study methodology, the participants and their roles, and the data collection processes used to capture their grant implementation and leadership experiences. The case study design provided the opportunity to capture rich narratives and create themes (Mertin, 1987; Thomas, 2015; Yin, 1989). Chapter 4 presents the themes that emerged as a result of this research.
CHAPTER 4: DISCUSSION

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore with 12 GEAR UP project staff the leadership traits and engagement practices they identified as influential for successfully implementing the grant implementation and increasing college-going rates in West Tennessee. This investigation provided a better understanding of the effort required for community mobilization and the achievement of a state-ascribed and academic goal of a federal educational policy. This study enabled exploring (a) how the GEAR UP TN principals and site coordinators defined successful collaboration with nonprofits and higher education institutions, (b) the principal and site coordinator leadership traits that correlated with effective engagement between community stakeholders and high schools, and (c) the engagement practices most often used in collaboratives to increase college-going rates by five or more percentage points.

Data Collection Instrument

The data collection instrument was a 26-question semistructured interview protocol constructed based on the literature review and questions related to the literature themes of TLT. The interviews enabled exploring the relationships between the principals, site coordinators, and community stakeholders and the LMX concepts to find the leadership best practices in the principal and site coordinator relationships. Each interview question connected to one of the following themes on transitional leadership: (a) idealized influence, (b) intellectual stimulation, and (c) individualized consideration. The interview questions also connected to one of the two themes of the LMX theory, in-group and out-group characteristics. Each interview question linked to the study’s research questions. A peer-debriefing team reviewed and provided feedback on the interview questions via a Likert scale and discussions. The feedback sessions indicated the
ability to reliably communicate the questions to each participant. After revising the questions based on the peer-debriefing feedback, the expansion of the interview instrument occurred to form the current 26-interview questionnaire for site coordinators, district administrators, and principals.

**Data Analysis**

The data analysis was a seven-step process with 200 significant statements, 121 elements, three categories, seven meaning units, and three themes. Step 1 consisted of crafting significant statements from the interview transcripts. For example, the statement, “Initially, [principals] were a little resistant, and in their defense, I think they did not understand exactly what the grant was going to offer,” resulted in the element of reluctant buy-in. Step 2 commenced by grouping elements according to similarities to create meaning units. For example, grouping reluctant buy-in with similar elements resulted in the meaning unit *challenges and resolves*. The final steps entailed grouping categories and meaning units by relationship to form themes. For example, challenges and resolves was the meaning unit grouped with attributions and obligations to produce the theme of overcoming challenges. Ultimately, the analysis resulted in the following themes: (a) operational input, (b) stakeholder engagement, and (c) overcoming challenges.

**Themes**

The study produced three themes: (a) overcoming challenges, (b) operational input, and (c) stakeholder engagement (see Table 2). Theme 1, *overcoming challenges*, suggests that a combination of leadership traits were assets in the creation of mutually beneficial resolutions. Theme 2, *operational inputs*, indicates the state-level engagement practices and requirements imposed on the collaboratives. Theme 3, *stakeholder engagement*, included the tactics employed
to create agreement among the internal and external stakeholders. Many of the participants’ narratives produced interrelated themes, as indicated in Chapter 5.

Table 4

Themes and Meaning Units

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overcoming challenges</th>
<th>Operational inputs</th>
<th>Stakeholder engagement</th>
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<td>• Obligation</td>
<td>• Defining success</td>
<td>• Communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Attitudes</td>
<td>• Grand introductions</td>
<td>• Engagement</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Challenges and resolves</td>
<td>• Grant training</td>
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Overcoming Challenges

Overcoming challenges was the first theme in the study. Overcoming challenges consisted of the participants’ accounts of the obstacles they encountered and the attributes or activities that enabled them to manipulate or alleviate barriers to gain the desired outputs or outcomes for successful implementation. This theme had three meaning units: obligations, attributes, and challenges and resolves.

Obligations

The findings resulted in obligations as a meaning unit. Obligations suggest that the site coordinators’ sense of duty either remained consistent or varied by the populations served: the cohort or priority groups. The site coordinators served and imparted college access activities with the cohort group from the seventh grade to the end of the first year of college. The discussions of obligations included general obligations and cohort or priority group obligations.

Obligations was the first category of the theme of overcoming challenges. General obligation emerged from Jelesa’s assertion that the site coordinator “felt obligated [to] each task on the job to be sure that students were receiving the service they needed, regardless of the school.” Whitley shared this sentiment and said, “Obligation didn’t vary by school. It was important [for the site coordinator] to actually cater to all the students.” Duane stated, “The site
coordinator really had a relationship with the students, and she was always available.” Each site coordinator served two groups of students: the priority group (12th graders) and the cohort group (students guided from seventh grade until the end of their first year of college). Although the site coordinators spent considerably more time with the cohort group, they felt a general obligation and a desire to perform equally and ensure the success of both groups.

In the interviews, cohort obligation and varied obligation also appeared. Specifically, cohort obligation emerged in Lettie’s assertion that “you always pay more attention, I feel, to the cohort group than the priority group.” Varied obligation was apparent in Kim’s suggestion that obligation “varied by school, based on the previous relationship with one of the schools.” Kim’s and Lettie’s statements were outliers in the interview responses, as most site coordinators and principals reported a universal sense of duty to all the targeted groups. Therefore, obligation related to overcoming challenges in that the site coordinator’s sense of duty indicated the prioritization of the student groups.

Attributes

Another meaning unit, attributes included the self-reported and observer-reported character traits that the participants identified as essential for achieving the grant requirements and outcomes. Attributes had the following elements: (a) student-centric, (b) resourceful, and (c) caring.

Student-Centric. Student-centric was the first element of attributes. Student-centric emerged in Jaleesa’s suggestion that she worked because the collaborative “was able to provide services to students.” Similarly, Duane said’ the site coordinator “went above and beyond to make sure that students have access.” These examples showed interviewees considered supporting students the motivation or the driving force of their efforts. Student-centric also
emerged in Julian’s assertion that being “kid-centric first, then family-centric, [and] maybe school- or grade-centric” was the key to the effective administration of the grant. Julian’s statement indicates the need to prioritize students within the contexts of their bioecological or multilayered social-environmental systems. Jaleesa also discussed the need to remain student-centric by stating that she “loved the underdog, and you work with the parents that the counselor doesn’t always want to work with.” Her statement indicates her motivation to work with parents who would not receive an audience with the school counselor. Therefore, student-centric connected to attributes by showing the inspiration for the interviewee’s work. Specifically, student-centric indicates the need for collaborative leadership to focus on students’ and families’ participation in college access activities and achievement of college readiness benchmarks.

**Resourceful.** Resourceful was the second element of attributes. Resourceful emerged in Duane’s suggestion that the site coordinator was “able to address what she did not know. [She] was extremely resourceful, even when there was red tape.” Duane’s statement indicates the site coordinator’s ability to find solutions to concerns and barriers. Resourceful also emerged in Spencer’s assertion that the ability to pay attention to modest particulars and a “working knowledge” of the district were effective characteristics. His statement suggests the leadership team had a foundational understanding essential for steering grant operations. Spencer added to resourceful in saying that he considered it helpful to have someone who “provided consistency of activities” within multiple schools. His statement indicates the need for reliability for the programs to address the proposed objectives within various high school environments. Therefore, resourceful connected to attributes, as it was a skill set that enabled the persistence of the leadership team, despite implementation obstacles.
Caring. Caring was the third element of attributes. Caring emerged when Ron’ said, “[The site coordinator] cared [about] what was good for the kids. She listened to us. She listened to the principles and listened to the parents.” Similarly, Walter said, “[The site coordinator was] very caring [with] parents [and] with kids.” Ron’s and Walter’s statements showed the site coordinator’s ability to actively listen to and engage the diverse stakeholder group. Caring also emerged in Lettie’s assertion that the site coordinator “want[ed] students to participate in all of the services or have access to everything that the grant has to offer, and not pass up those opportunities.” Lettie defined care as accessibility. Vernon added to the subtheme of caring by stating that the site coordinator achieved effectiveness while “being open to others in their thoughts and ideas throughout the process.” Vernon emphasized receptiveness to bidirectional communication as a key component of caring. Therefore, caring related to attributes by presenting the participants’ motivation for their leadership behavior and the tactical skills they used during grant implementation. The leadership team simultaneously cared about students and student outcomes and carefully engaged stakeholders to position them to receive the benefits of grant participation.

Challenges and Resolves

Challenges and resolves was a meaning unit that addressed the obstacles and solutions presented across each ’collaborative. Challenges and resolves had two categories, problems and solutions. Problems had the elements of standardization and district constraints; solutions had the elements of flexibility and data.

Problems

Standardization. Standardization was the first element of challenges and resolves. Standardization emerged when Duane described the restrictive nature of funding and the
requirement “to just use funding exactly the way you say, but it has to be aligned to the grant” as a problem for the rural school district. His statement indicates the lack of flexibility to spend funds on items not prescribed in the grant documentation that would provide support for the overall project as a prevalent hurdle. Standardization also emerged when Lettie said, “When you write a grant, you try to ensure that it’s not one-size-fits-all.” Lettie’s team served in an urban community with Black and Hispanic students being compared to predominantly White and rural student groups. Lettie shared examples of undocumented students and parents who felt “leery” and would not complete the required FAFSA application for fear of consequences less favorable than the comparative peer group. Lettie described several Black students who could not attend required services such as tutoring because they “had to pick up their brother and sister from the elementary school.” Lettie also identified standardized participation attainment rates as a problem. She discussed the obstacles unique to her schools that had an impact on implementation. Lettie also noted the initial lack of a metric for implementation in the respective environment.

Kim added to standardization by stating she found it challenging to “figure out what each requirement was going to look like at each of my schools.” The grand had state-set, standardized requirements solidified through the approved grant application. Kim’s statement indicates the effort it took to fit required activities into the complex and varied structure of the participating high schools. Therefore, standardization connected to the category of problem and the meaning unit of challenges and resolves by showing the distress of the collaborative members to conform to criteria established for them but without them.

**District Constraints.** District constraint was the second element of category and problem within the meaning unit of challenges and resolves. District constraint emerged when Jaleesa
said, “It was very difficult having three schools. The delivery of services was difficult. You were not at any school [for] 2 consecutive days, which [also] made it hard to connect.” When developing their sub-award application, the leaders of Jaleesa’s district determined that the collaborative would include multiple high schools. The decision to have multiple sites left the site coordinator with limited ability to coordinate and execute the required activities and build rapport at the respective sites.

District constraint also emerged when Kim’ asserted that when introducing the grant, her team was “a little resistant. They did not understand exactly what the grant was going to offer and were concerned that it was another requirement.” Her statement indicates the myriad of district services, requirements, and initiatives experienced by her team members during their tenure with the district. Resistance was also a challenge found among student groups. Walter stated, “I saw early on that [you have to] change the mindset of kids who grew up in environments where secondary education and careers were [not] discussed a lot in the home environment.” His statement related to the rural location of the school, the industries present in the community, and the postsecondary attainment of the area’s residents. The students who attended his school did not often engage in postsecondary discussions or activities.

Duane and Whitley added to district constraint by referencing the significant bureaucracy they experienced throughout the grant implementation process. Whitley found it challenging “working through a lot of the red tape with the district, whether it dealt with testing or just actually getting paperwork signed.” Whitley also described the multiple offices and persons she had to interact with to complete tasks related to the grant programming. She described her range of activities as limited by the bureaucratic challenges she encountered with tasks as simple as “getting paperwork signed” to as complex as “testing.” The red tape required a great amount of
the site coordinator’s effort. Therefore, the district constraint element connected to the problems category of the challenges and resolves meaning unit by indicating the district-level barriers to grant operation.

**Solutions**

**Flexibility.** Flexibility was the first element of the solutions category in challenges and resolves. Flexibility emerged in Spencer’s suggestion that effective principals “were a little bit late back [and] kind of rolled with the punches.” Spencer’s statement indicates the need for principals to remain open and responsive to new requests and information as they emerge. Principal flexibility was a particularly significant finding, as each year, the collaborative leaders received new required services for new student groups for which they would be accountable in the subsequent year. Flexibility also emerged in Julian’s assertion that principals needed to have an open mind and “be able to say, ‘Okay, here—this is our whole program, and this is where GEAR UP fits.’” Walter similarly described the flexibility of the site coordinator’s mindset as an effective attribute. The participants viewed the site coordinator’s and principal’s ability and willingness to adjust to change to achieve the targeted goals as positive traits from the district level. Ron and Lettie added to flexibility by describing innovative problem-solving. Ron spoke of the site coordinator’s ability “to come up with some amazing ideas that helped.” Lettie described the state’s efforts to devise “innovative ways to address” some of the challenges in the district. Innovative problem-solving is a tactical example of the adaptability needed for successful grant implementation. Therefore, flexibility related to the solutions category of the *challenges and resolves* meaning unit, presenting an effective component and strategy to address the challenges of grant implementation.
**Data.** Data was the second element in support of the solutions category in challenges and resolves. Data emerged when Duane said he appreciated that the state provided the collaboratives with “the opportunity to look at the data at a state level.” His response indicates the increase in accessible data through the district–state partnership. An example was the National Clearinghouse Data, which enabled the collaborative leaders to know where their students attended postsecondary school and the percentage of the students who persisted to the second year of college. The use of data was another important trait. Lettie found the data helpful in designing pilots. She said, “[We’ll] see how [the pilot] goes. Hopefully, it will go well, and we’ll be able to sustain it for the entire school.” Duane described that many meetings included the use of data to prepare for any formal interaction. In both examples, data were a strategic tool to justify an intervention to meet grant requirements and support school needs. Walter added to data by stating that data “speak to the success” of the implementation. This response presented data as a selling point that showed the successful actions of the district and collaboratives. Therefore, data connected to the solutions category of the meaning unit of challenges and resolves by showing that the collaborative leaders used the data as a tool for intervention, awareness, and promotion to identify and address the barriers to success.

**Operational Input**

Operational input was the second theme in the study. The theme of operational input presented the materials and structure provided by the intermediary agency for the increased likelihood of successful grant implementation. In this study, the operational input theme included the artifacts, training, and organized engagement opportunities provided to and interpreted by the participants. The following meaning units were part of this theme: defining success, grant introduction, and grant training.
Defining Success

Defining success was a meaning unit. Defining success suggests that although the state provided the desired outcomes for the project, each site had an internal and operational notion of successful grant implementation that aligned with the state’s directive but remained subjective to the counties’ circumstances. Defining success had two categories, sustainability and aligned metrics. Aligned metrics, which included the outcomes indicated by state mandates, grant requirements, and district administration, had the following elements: (a) improved college readiness metrics for schools and students, greater opportunities for collaboratives and students, and increased awareness of GEAR UP TN. Sustainability, which consisted of the activities or sentiments that continued to exist beyond the grant funding cycle, had three elements: improved quality of life for students, alumni support, and program opportunities.

Sustainability. Sustainability was the first element of the defining success meaning unit. The element emerged when Jaleesa defined success as the “longevity of the numbers” or the district’s ability to maintain the progress of the GEAR UP TN grant implementation. One measure of progress was the district’s ability to maintain the human capital (of the staff) gained through federal funding. Bradford said that districts need someone to “take care of that sometimes tedious process.” According to Bradford, having points of contact for college access initiatives is a beneficial strategy for schools and districts. The key personnel provided support to the primary leadership roles of the schools, including the principals, counselors, and teachers. Additionally, Bradford explained that the role had an integral part in supporting parents. Lettie added to sustainability by stating, “Some [graduates] go straight into the workforce, but they realize [they’re] not going to go very far without any type of postsecondary [school]. Then they call [the site coordinator], inquiring about how to get into school.” According to Jaleesa,
sustainability consists of more than maintaining the statistical data in grant reports or state report cards. Sustainability also includes the collaborative’s ability to “improve the quality of life for the students” and students’ motivation to persist through postsecondary school to graduation. Therefore, sustainability connected to defining success because it presented the objective purpose of the grant and state opportunity and the subjective aspirations of the collaborative leadership.

**Alignment Metrics.** Improved college readiness metrics for schools and students was the first element of the alignment metrics category of the meaning unit of defining success. The grant application to the state, the implementation guide, and the required services chart indicated the grant metrics for success. The required services chart provided the collaboratives with the performance metrics for performance evaluation. The performance metrics included activity, goal and objective alignment, participation rates, proposed terms of service delivery, and costs. The leaders of each collaborative had to use the required services chart to develop their annual work plans or strategic plans of activities and engagement.

Alignment metrics, although state-prescribed, reflected many of the collaboratives’ goals. For example, Kim stated, “Success meant more kids were informed and inspired to pursue postsecondary [education].” Vernon defined the success of the collaborative as “an increase in college and career readiness, increase in ACT scores overall, an increase in Ready TN Graduate Status, and an increase in parental involvement.” Vernon described a combination of state and grant success metrics. According to the Tennessee Department of Education, Ready TN Graduate Status indicates the college preparedness of students who meet state-determined criteria and their likelihood of obtaining high-quality employment. The prescribed criteria include an ACT score of 21 or higher, four early postsecondary opportunities (EPSOs), two
EPSOs and an earned industry certification, or two EPSOs and an earned ASVAB AFQT military skill score. The Ready TN Graduate Status is also a measurement used in the state to mark districts’ yearly progress. Vernon’s reference to “increase” indicates that achieving the identified goals could increase student and parent interest in programmatic offerings at schools.

Ron said the success metrics of “a higher college rate and more [students applying]” also aligned with the state-prescribed metrics of success. Each statement indicates the congruent definitions of success between the state, district, grant, and leadership within the collaboratives. As an observer and participant of the initial conversations of the grant and the potential impact on the county, I found that congruency also showed that the district leaders were early adopters of the grant requirements and state compliance activities.

**Grant Introduction**

Grant introduction was a second meaning unit. Grant introduction suggests that the principals’ and site coordinators’ relationship traits indicated the formal and informal interactions used to introduce the grant to the collaboratives and communities. Grant introduction had two elements, individual lead and team lead.

**Individual Lead.** Individual lead was the first element of grant introduction. The participants described the principals as the primary individuals who led the launch of the grant. Jaleesa and Kim were the anomalies, as indicated by their experiences in the preceding paragraph. Individual lead emerged when Duane said, “[GEAR UP] was in line with me always articulating that our goal as a high school would be to graduate students and prepare them for college.” Duane made the connection for the faculty and staff and determined at the onset of the grant that its goals aligned with the school’s mission. Individual lead also emerged when Whitley said, “The principals got information from us and catered the information to their population and
[determined] how it was going to support their particular school.” Whitley’s statement suggests that principal’s buy-in affects the significance of the grant at schools. Walter added to individual lead by stating that “being an administrator is sorting through the bad and the good [and] trying to find the good and promoting it to the best of your ability.” His response showed his leadership approach to the adoption of new programs in the high school. Therefore, the individual lead element connected to grant introduction as it showed that the principals’ beliefs in the grant indicated how active they were with the grant introductions to internal and external stakeholders.

**Individual Lead (Site Coordinator).** Individual lead emerged when Jaleesa said, “I was responsible for promoting GEAR UP TN to the stakeholders, more so than [principals] were.” Her statement showed that promoting GEAR UP TN was more her responsibility than the principals’. Similarly, Julian said, “[Site coordinators] held meetings with individuals more than group, but also then [as] part of the group.” Julian described the multiple formats of the GEAR UP TN introductions under the direction of the site coordinators. Kim’s and Julian’s’ observations also aligned with the notion that “Every introduction at every school was different.” Kim’s statement indicates the variability of the grant introductions led by the site coordinators. A rationale for the site coordinators to lead the grant introductions emerged in Jaleesa’s statement that some principals “promoted what GEAR UP was doing, [but] they were not very involved.”

**Team Lead.** Collaborative lead was the second element of grant introductions. Collaborative lead emerged in Spencer’s suggestion that the collaborative lead approach consisted of principals working with the district and site coordinators. Spencer said, “The [principals] have [the power] to delegate to others, [ensuring] everybody works together to make the event positive.” In the example of collaborative lead, the district administrators, site coordinators, and principals functioned as a cohesive unit within the district, school, and
community. Collaborative lead also emerged when Vernon indicated the need to “collaborate with others and have [them] bring their thoughts and ideas.” His statement indicates the value of each member’s contribution to the successful introduction of the grant. Ron added to collaborative lead and Vernon’s statement by stating, “[The site coordinator] would speak with the principal first, and together they would decide how we would go about it [and] get together with the teachers.” Ron’s statement was an example of the techniques used for a team-lead grant introduction. Therefore, collaborative lead connected to grant introduction by presenting the collective impact of the combined roles in the introduction of the grant requirements to community stakeholders.

**Grant Training**

*Grant training* was a meaning unit. Grant training suggests that the participants found training opportunities presented throughout the grant funding cycle important for successful grant implementation. Grant training consisted of the professional development opportunities the participants received throughout the grant funding cycle. Grant training had the following elements: state training, grant orientation, and project leadership.

**State Training.** State training was the first element of grant training. State training emerged in Whitley’s statement that state training presented “to [principals] exactly what GEAR UP was” and enabled the site coordinators to obtain “total buy-in from them.” According to Whitley, the state training provided credibility to the project and the motivation for the principals to engage and implement the project. Julian and Bradford also asserted that the state training enabled the participants to “learn what was going on across the state and [the] GEAR UP expectations.” Julian said, “[The training included] very helpful interactions with other people doing the same thing. We learned a lot from them, [and] I think we’ve taught a lot.” These
statements indicate the value of opportunities to network and clarify the expectations in the state training. Bradford emphasized the importance of state training and said, “The interaction with the other directors and site coordinator [enabled us to see] the things they were doing [and] accomplishing and the state [and] federal requirements.” His statement suggests that the grant clarification resulted not only from state-level facilitation but also from informal interactions between the various collaboratives across the state. Therefore, the state training provided networking opportunities and grant clarification and connected to grant training as a meaning unit.

**Grant Orientation.** Grant orientation was the second element of grant training and emerged from many interviewees’ descriptions of state training. The grant orientation artifacts included PowerPoints and the implementation guide. The grant orientation consisted of a series of informational sessions in which each collaborative’s leadership team received (a) national, state, county, and school-level data; (b) the state’s implementation manual; and (c) professional development by nationally recognized speakers. Through the grant orientation meetings, the collaborative leaders learned about the connections between their roles as grant participants and the state goals set by the governor. The participants also engaged in nationally recognized best practices and postsecondary research. The engagement methods of the meeting included speakers, presentations with embedded videos, small-group discussions, and participant feedback via share-outs and written responses on large Post-Its placed on the wall. Therefore, grant orientation was the initial and premier reference for the meaning unit of grant training.

**Project Leadership.** According to the implementation guide, a team of state-level administrators facilitated the grant orientation meetings. The state-level administration team included the associate executive director, two regional coordinators, the director of compliance
and reporting, three statewide services coordinators, and the fiscal manager. The associate 
executive director served as the project director and handled legislative oversight, managed the 
program, determined the state-level goals, and served as the manager of the state-level team. The 
two regional coordinators served as compliance officers and points of contact for the districts 
that received grant funds. The statewide service coordinators provided auxiliary services, such as 
technical support, professional training, student leadership development, and communications 
support for the GEAR UP collaboratives and any K–12 system or school in need of support. The 
fiscal manager conducted annual risk assessments and audits of the sites approved for grant 
funding.

**Stakeholder Engagement**

Stakeholder engagement was the third theme. Stakeholder engagement consisted of the 
varied activities and relationship commitments formed or leveraged in support of the GEAR UP 
TN implementation. This theme had two meaning units, *communication* and *engagement type*.

**Communication**

The meaning unit communication suggests a bidirectional exchange of information 
produces mutually beneficial outcomes for the involved parties. Communication had the 
following elements: internal communication, external communication, and best practices.

**Internal Communication.** Internal communication was the first element of 
communication. The element emerged when Duane said, “Absolutely, [there was] a high degree 
of communication.” The principal described the primary means of communication as “structured, 
regular meetings” with a few “informal meetings as well.” Duane described the formal meeting 
sessions as the primary means of communication between the site coordinator and principal. He 
also indicated that the structure of the meetings provided him with the opportunity to prepare for
the formal meetings and make use of informal interactions. Internal communication also emerged from Vernon’s claim that the site coordinator “communicated via email regularly [and] scheduled meetings; she always kept me in the loop.” Vernon also described his communication with the site coordinator as formal and informal and reiterated the value that previous principals placed on structuring internal communications. Jaleesa added that the internal communication varied by the principal and that she did not have a high degree of communication with one of her principals. Additionally, Jaleesa said, “I definitely had to communicate a lot with the assistant principal and key people that could make things happen.” Her statement contrasts with previous participants, indicating that regular internal communication was not a standardized responsibility of every principal and site coordinator in this study. Therefore, internal communication connected to communication in that it was the primary method with which the principal and site coordinator maintained the transfer of knowledge within the collaboratives.

**External Communication.** External communication was the second element of communication. The theme emerged in Ron’s statement that the site coordinators “sent out flyers to community groups. We sent out letters home through the children or sent out permission slips [to be signed] by the parents.” Ron later explained that the site coordinators also sent emails. His statements indicate the variety of methods used to communicate with parents and community stakeholders. According to Whitley, the varied methods included “a robocall service to communicate and the [school’s] marquees.” The use of technology in external communication also emerged from Lettie’s assertion that SignalVine, a texting platform, was another useful tool for communicating with parent groups. The previous statements are examples of leveraging commonly used resources, such as technology and permission slips, to communicate with stakeholders outside of the school. Ron added to external communication by stating that during
events, such as “teacher conferences, materials [were] available, bulletin boards [were created], and Facebook messages were posted.” Whitley explained the various external communication by stating, “Sometimes, it was a greater need at some of the schools than others as far as getting parents [and] students to participate. If there was a greater need, then that’s when the communication was different.” Their statements showed that the collaborative leaders used different approaches to ensure the parents and community stakeholders engaged in grant implementation. Therefore, external communication connected to stakeholder engagement because it was the primary method used to promote interest and community investment in grant implementation.

**Best Practices.** Best practices was the third element of communication. The element emerged from Spencer’s suggestion that, with these techniques, “Nothing ever fell through the cracks” when there was “effective communication between the principals and the site coordinator.” His statement indicates the consistent application of communication methods or techniques to accomplish the desired goal of accountable communication. Lettie said, “The communication ensur[es] that [participants] are actually participating in the services.” Best practices emerged from Julian’s assertion that the collaborative leaders used communication to “maximize GEAR UP to fit as part of the overarching program.” These statements showed that the external communication techniques included the use of existing resources to embed the new grant program components. Therefore, the best practices included the communication supports used to increase participation in grant events and activities.

**Engagement**

*Engagement* was a meaning unit. Stakeholder engagement suggests that successful grant implementation requires programmatic and financial support from internal and external
interested parties. The engagement of community members was a nonprescriptive grant requirement. *Engagement* had the following elements: awareness and intent, fiscal buy-in, and leveraged resources.

**Awareness and Intent.** Awareness and intent comprised the first element of stakeholder engagement. "The element emerged when Whitley described awareness and intent as the “sharing of the information with the communities, inviting the community holders to the events, letting them know what was going on and just constantly involving them.” Whitley described awareness and intent as a kinetic process between the site coordinator and community stakeholders. Awareness and intent also emerged when Lettie suggested “getting out there [and] having conversations [and] letting them know how they can help us meet the needs of our students.” This assertion suggests the intentionality of awareness and intent. Jaleesa added to awareness and intent by stating the site coordinator’s role included “attending board meetings and [other] kinds of things to promote GEAR UP. You have to extend yourself into that community—you have to attend events at night and [on] weekends.” Awareness and intent emerged in many of the interviews as formal and informal interactions that occurred outside of the formally structured 7:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. school day. Therefore, awareness and intent connected to stakeholder engagement by focusing on the exchanges and approaches with individuals outside of the collaborative leadership team.

**Fiscal Buy-In.** Fiscal buy-in was the second element of stakeholder engagement. This element included the ability of the site coordinators and principals to encourage community engagement with grant-related activities. For the participants, fiscal buy-in consisted of effective practices that produced support beyond the district and school. In essence, the element indicates the results of their exerted and conscious efforts to create programmatic sponsorships. Fiscal
buy-in emerged when Lettie said, “[The principals and site coordinators] reached out to adopters to ensure that they could provide us with any type of additional resources to match monetary donations.”

Fiscal buy-in or matching were requirements of the grant award. The fiscal buy-in consisted of any donation or service activity that addressed the grant’s allowable expense requirements. Lettie described the ease with which she accessed stakeholder groups to obtain resources to support the grant implementation. Bradford also mentioned fiscal buy-in by referencing the costs provided for by the district and community groups, including “phone calls, newspaper ads, [and] call systems.” Fiscal buy-in also emerged when Ron said, “The banks are the insurance companies that would match stuff.” Ron stated that investments into and discussions about students taking college trips” opened so many of [the community member’s’] eyes” and were sources of pride for the town. According to the participants, the community members viewed financially supporting the grant implementation as more of an honor than an obligation. Therefore, fiscal buy-in connected to engagement by showing that the community members willingly supported educational endeavors financially when asked. Fiscal buy-in was an engagement tactic used for community groups to support the match requirement. Internally, the collaborative leadership team leveraged existing relationships to gain resources and support the programmatic and participation requirements for GEAR UP TN.

**Leveraged Resources.** Leveraged resources was the second element of stakeholder engagement. The operational definition of the noun, *resource*, is the capital (human, services, supplies, or funding) found within the district or school or, in the case of the urban district, a plan chosen during challenging circumstances (Oxford Languages, n.d.). Leveraged resources emerged when Julian said that “[leveraging resources] wasn’t necessarily data-driven but [that
the] engagement by the community, parents, and students” resulted in the grant outcomes. His statement indicates the value of the engagement and utilization of the people in the county to achieve the grant’s goals. Leveraged resources also emerged when Lettie described district resources as critical for overcoming the cultural barriers that emerged during daily operations. Specifically, Lettie said, “[The district] teamed [the site coordinator] up with two or three professionals in our building who were able to speak with the parents. We’re building relationships that way.” According to Duane, this support enabled the collaborative’s leaders to meet grant requirements and the site coordinator to “address community fears.” The urban collaborative provided services to a large Hispanic population; therefore, the site coordinator indicated the grant required the completion of federal forms that the Hispanic students and their guardians did not want to complete. Leveraging the resources provided by the district allowed parents to ask questions in their native language to persons who understood the repercussions of the forms and could guide them and the site coordinator through a mutually beneficial college access process. Therefore, leveraged resources was a tactic used during stakeholder engagement to foster existing relationships in new ways for grant implementation.

**Summary**

Chapter 4 presented the findings of analyzing the 12 interviews. The chapter included the participants’ statements to illustrate their individual experiences and provide insight into the collective experience of the sample. The interview transcripts underwent assessment for significant statements, elements, meaning units, and themes, with three themes emerging: overcoming challenges, operational input, and stakeholder engagement. The first theme, overcoming challenges, presented the concerns the participants encountered during the grant implementation, as well as their sagacious responses. The second theme, operational input,
focused on the direct or bidirectional transfer of knowledge from state to collaborative, from collaborative to community, from principal to site coordinator, and from site coordinator to principal. The third theme, stakeholder engagement, addressed the transfer of knowledge of goods and services exchanges for goal attainment. Each independent but interrelated theme emerged from the participants’ discussions of the systems of grant implementation and their respective roles within the system. Chapter 5 further presents the results.
CHAPTER 5: SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Overview of Study

The purpose of this study was to explore leadership traits and practices in GEAR UP West Tennessee collaboratives during the 2012–2019 funding cycle. Chapter 1 established the critical problem and purpose of the study. The state instituted GEAR UP TN in October 2012 to help counties improve their college-going rates, serving over 37,000 students from 83 schools (THEC, 2012). A review of state data showed a lack of investigative studies on the leadership traits of principals and site coordinators responsible for implementing this multiyear, multimillion-dollar project at a regional level. Therefore, this study was an investigation of the literature regarding leadership, successful discretionary grant implementation, and the traits and engagement practices of individuals who increased college-going rates in West Tennessee collaboratives.

The study had a social construction framework and theoretical lens of transformational leadership and LMX. Transformational leadership is a shared leadership style in which the leader and the follower actively work to obtain greater motivation and morality (Burns, 1978). This leadership model focuses on the relationship and not the hierarchal positions of leaders and followers (Bass, 1985) and is appropriate for assisting organizations that seek change (Lussier & Achua, 2010). This study also employed LMX to create social capital through social exchanges that promote favorable working environments. LMX effectively facilitates organizational change (Arif et al., 2017). Researchers use TLT to identify leaders’ characteristics and adopt LMX to identify the features of leaders’ relationships and interactions.

Each collaborative represents an organization in search of change, specifically to develop and foster a college-going culture through four objectives:
• Increase educational expectations of GEAR UP TN students and families through expanded knowledge of postsecondary access and financial aid opportunities.

• Enhance GEAR UP TN students’ academic preparation to improve high school graduation rates and postsecondary enrollment, retention, and completion.

• Provide effective professional development for classroom teachers, schools, and system staff to ensure increased academic rigor and postsecondary preparation.

• Encourage community engagement through GEAR UP TN to sustain an environment that supports college access and lifelong learning.

The study participants described the changes in various ways. Walter discussed mindset modifications in parents and students, Jelesa recognized sustained effort, and Bradford heard positive community talk about the school. Despite differing labels, the shifts all supported the grant’s goals.

Chapter 2 was a review of the key literature on transformational leadership and the four components of idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. Individualized consideration pertains to the facilitated personal development of followers guided by a thoughtful and compassionate leader (Bass & Avolio, 1995). Also identified were in-group and out-group dynamics as significant components of LMX. Chapter 3 presented the qualitative methodology and case study design to explore leadership traits in GEAR UP TN – West collaboratives. Data collection was via semistructured interviews and grant implementation artifacts. Criterion and convenience sampling of the population of GEAR UP TN – West 2012–2018 principals, site coordinators, and district administrators resulted in 12 study participants. Data analysis occurred using Saldaña’s (2016) framework for coding data, which allowed for condensing interview data into findings.
As shown in Chapter 4, the findings produced three themes: operational inputs, stakeholder engagement, and overcoming challenges. Operational inputs are the definitions and resources to build capacity in participating collaboratives and comprise the meaning units of defining success, grant introduction, and grant training. Theme 2, stakeholder engagement, reflects the diverse actions and relationship assurances formed or leveraged in support of GEAR UP TN implementation. Two meaning units, communication and engagement, support this theme. Finally, overcoming challenges emerged from the participants’ accounts of obstacles encountered and the characteristics or actions allowing them to respond to or improve the barriers to achieve the desired goals. This theme comprised three meaning units: obligations, attributes, and challenges and resolves.

**Overview of This Chapter**

Chapter 5 presents the significance of this study of leadership traits in GEAR UP TN – West. The literature showed public policies’ failure to produce the objective of decreasing inequities (see Ingram et al., 2007). The social construction framework highlights this policy implementation misstep via the distribution of benefits and punishments. The impact of policy change is apparent in the social construction and influence of the impacted groups (Sabatier & Weible, 2014). Despite the pattern and persistence of social constructions, educational gains have occurred through policy implementation. Innovative policy implementation is the responsibility of any leaders who accept federal funding (Aarons et al., 2014). Leaders influence agencies’ ability to implement innovations (Michaelis et al., 2010) and are critical contributors to the environments of the given agencies (Gumusluoglu & Ilsev, 2009). Thus, the reasons indicate the need to explore leadership related to implementation best practices (Aarons et al., 2014). Exploration related to this study includes a comparison to the literature and a brief discussion of
the findings by research question. The following sections provide an overall significance of the findings related to the social construction framework. Chapter 5 concludes with recommendations for practice, research, and policy related to leadership traits in GEAR UP TN – West.

**Comparison to Literature**

Many of the themes presented in the individual interviews aligned with the literature review. Consistent with Chapter 1, the principals and site coordinators who increased college-going rates exemplified Kouzes and Posner’s (1987) leadership definition by “mobilizing others to want to struggle for shared aspirations” (p. 30). What differed from the leadership literature was the notion of an intermediary serving as a leader—specifically, a transformational leader—the impact of standardized implementation in urban environments, and the significance of sustainability.

**Transformational Leadership**

The fundamental intent of transformational leadership to empower and mobilize individuals around a common goal (increased postsecondary attainment) (Donate & Guadamilles, 2011; Rijal, 2009) showed the appropriateness of using TLT for this study. Despite focusing on a set of agreed-up actions and a common goal, GEAR UP grant-funded projects are means to change P–16 systems, imparting the skills, knowledge, and attributes needed to increase postsecondary attainment for a targeted group of students. The research findings reflected the agreed-upon actions and common goals within the operational inputs theme, defining success meaning unit, and aligned metrics element. Determining outcomes in aligned metrics was by state mandates and grant requirements as promoted by district administration. Three elements supported this meaning unit: improved college readiness metrics for schools and
students, greater opportunities for collaboratives and students, and increased awareness of GEAR UP TN.

Individualized consideration, a leader’s ability to cater growth opportunities and acknowledge motivation, falls within the operational inputs theme and the meaning unit grant training (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Julian and Bradford provided examples of this alignment, finding that training allowed participants to “learn what was going on across the state and GEAR UP expectations.” Julian said there “were very helpful interactions with other people doing the same thing. We learned a lot from them. I think we’ve taught a lot.” Moreover, individual consideration was apparent in the intermediary’s development of the state training that highlighted the collaboratives’ successes and utilized individual data points to target growth opportunities.

Idealized influence includes the leader’s actions and the follower’s perception of the leader’s behaviors. Idealized influence reflects leaders’ ability to exhibit behaviors deemed appropriate, admirable, and congruent with their messaging (Kariuki, 2021) and promote attachment development in followers (Bass & Riggio, 2006). It also represents the charismatic traits associated with leadership (Okoli et al., 2021). Idealized influence emerged from the operation inputs theme and grant introductions meaning unit. Five participants reflected leader–follower engagement, highlighting how principals received state-level mandates and translated them into feasible tasks for their teams. Additionally, as shown in all interviews, the principals and site coordinators exchanged follower and leader roles, depending on tasks. Each participant spoke positively when recounting their experiences.

Inspirational motivation indicates the leader’s ability to impart a vision of an organization’s future (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Edirisooriya, 2020), exercising transformational
leadership and empowering others to turn trials into prospects. Idealized influence relates to the stakeholder engagement theme and the communications meaning unit. The transformational leadership meaning unit emerged from the principals’ and district administrators’ narratives of intentionally showing respect at faculty and district meetings or with community groups for the opportunity to be a GEAR UP county. Transformational leadership was apparent in the narratives and marketing campaigns in local newspapers, on school bulletin boards, and with local community groups.

Intellectual stimulation is the component equipping individuals for creative problem-solving and novel approaches to mundane tasks and circumstances. Intellectual stimulation accounts for the transformational leader’s capacity to obtain followers’ interest in an identified concern and increase their ability to develop creative resolves (Bass, 1985). Intellectual stimulation is the most under researched component of TLT (Rafferty & Griffin, 2004) and relates to the theme overcoming challenges and meaning unit challenges and resolves. Overcoming challenges also contributes to the empowerment component of transformational leadership. Empowerment promotes independence and interdependence among followers, fostering self-efficacy to handle barriers or complicated circumstances (Donates et al., 2009; Rijal, 2009). The intellectual stimulation leadership component comprises a developmental orientation needed for organizational success. All interviewees felt empowered by the intermediary to complete grant implementation, with five using the word “innovative” when describing solutions and problem elements. In the urban collaborative, one principal empowered the site coordinator to act on their behalf as an authorized signatory to expedite approvals and mitigate bureaucracy.
The overcoming challenges theme and attributes and obligation meaning units contradicted the empowerment and intellectual stimulation components of transformational leadership. Whereas the components pertain to what the leader gives, the meaning units attributes and obligations address what leaders and followers bring to the leadership exchange or situation. Intellectual stimulation encourages knowledge-sharing to drive inventive solutions (Ghasabeh et al., 2015). Attributes are the self- and observer-reported character traits that participants identified as essential supports to achieving grant requirements and outcomes. Three elements support attributes: student-centric, resourceful, and caring. The obligation meaning unit aligned with Bass and Riggio’s (2006) warning regarding empowerment and alignment of goals.

Collaborative 1B interviews indicated the notion of followers being empowered and not aligned with the leaders’ goals, disrupting achievement (see Turner, 2018). Specifically, during FY15, the high school in Collaborative 1B successfully increased college-going rates to 64.8% and ACT scores by two percentage points; in FY16, its college-going rates dropped to 60.3%. Although this qualitative study does not present a causal relationship among variables, there had been a change in principal leadership. In the interview, the district administrator referenced this change, identifying the difference in the principals as the alignment and buy-in of grant implementation with district goals.

LMX was apparent in the stakeholder engagement theme and the communication and engagement meaning units. Discussions of LMX pertained to leaders’ and followers’ roles (Martin et al., 2010) specific to two categories of group interactions, in-group and out-group (Herrera et al., 2013). In-group relationships include negotiated role responsibilities and informal interactions, whereas out-group relationships stem from employment contracts. The in-group’s informal relational structure is vital to information-sharing within an organization (Wang &
Ahmed, 2003), which is significant because it endorses cultural development. The relational components of LMX include a bidirectional influence between leaders and followers, a sense of duty, fondness, and deference (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). The most evident notion of in-group and out-group was apparent in Duane’s decision to move the junior guidance counselor to a lower grade (out-group) due to a lack of demonstrated buy-in to the grant opportunity and goals. Specific to the transformational leadership examples provided, Duane and Walter hoped for a better future through the grant opportunity; however, in the urban collaborative, staff realignment was necessary to support the cast vision. In each collaborative, inspirational motivation promoted in-group dynamics through informed awareness, which influenced fiscal buy-in and leveraged resources.

**Discussion of Findings**

The findings of this study answered the three research questions: How do principals and site coordinators of GEAR UP TN – West communities define successful collaboration with nonprofits and higher education institutions, what perceived principal and site coordinator leadership traits create effective engagement between community stakeholders and high schools and what engagement practices were most often used in collaboratives that increased college-going rates by five or more percentage points? Themes, meaning units, and elements from the interviews connected to the research questions through interpretation and involvement insight.

**Research Question 1**

The first research question was, “How do principals and site coordinators of GEAR UP TN communities define successful collaboration with nonprofits and higher education institutions?” This question was a means to understand how the individuals responsible for grant implementation in their respective counties viewed successful partnerships during the grant
funding cycle. The primary definition of success aligned with the traditional metrics prescribed by the Tennessee Department of Education as influenced by the federal guidelines of the HEA. The themes operational inputs and stakeholder engagement addressed this question, as shown by Vernon’s mention of the TN Ready standard. The most significant variance in responses was apparent in the grant definition of sustainability. The funder described sustainability as maintaining objectives beyond the funding period. In this study, the participants explained sustainability through transformation: a culture shift, mindset change, and change in alumni relations. In defining success, Walter envisioned students confidently speaking with adults about their academic goals and life directions. Moreover, seven of 12 participants presented sustainability through images of a better, inspired, prepared future with more opportunities.

**Operational Inputs**

Operational Inputs relates to artifacts, training, and organized engagement opportunities provided to and interpreted by GEAR UP TN – West participants and supported by the meaning units defining success and grant introduction. Chapter 4 presented defining success as the state’s mandate of the desired outcomes for the project. Each site’s internal operational notion of fruitful grant implementation supported the state directive and was more subjective to the counties’ circumstances. The categories aligned metrics and sustainability with success. Sustainability, although planned as a part of grant activity, was a key finding of how site coordinators, district administrators, and principals defined successful collaboration with nonprofits and higher education institutions. Participants discussed sustainability in two forms, human capacity and positive growth. Person signifies the human capacity to complete and monitor college access work from a district level. Of the participating collaboratives, none had a district-appointed person who tracked students’ progression, monitored college-readiness benchmarks,
implemented college-access activities, and consistently reported successes according to the aligned metrics element. Each district administrator expressed the significance of having someone in the role to, as Bradford noted, “take care of that sometimes-tedious process” of getting students to college.

Positive growth pertained to sustained momentum initiated through grant activities. Similar to aligned metrics, the momentum emerged through ongoing grant activities, more college-going programming, and continued higher college-going rates. Positive growth also showed a relational aspect of engagement, specifically the confidence of stakeholders and the interviewed participants. The referenced confidence supported Stewart’s (2006) assertion that “School systems have become a source of blame for the many ills that affect our society” (p. 3) Inspiring confidence also indicated a positive growth tactic, which supports the Chapter 1 assertion that leadership is an avenue for mediating blame and creating systems of cooperation between internal and external stakeholders.

The interviews uncovered stakeholders’ confidence or positive belief in the district’s ability to help get individuals into schools. Jelesa reflected this view in reporting alumni returning and asking how to get into school. Lettie alluded to confidence in stressing the importance of “building that rapport and letting the families know that you are here as an advocate to assist with ensuring that their children are prepared once they graduate.” Confidence also presented in interviews as a belief that sustaining grant activities would “improve the quality of life for the students” and support students’ motivation to persist through postsecondary to graduation. Therefore, defining success emerged from interviewees’ perceptions of successful partnerships in grant implementation as they described the relational aspect and the components needed for success. Sustainability extends beyond the vision of success cast by transformational
leaders to adopting tasks and motivations that persist beyond the grant-funded period. The relational component of sustainability was also apparent in stakeholder engagement.

**Stakeholder Engagement**

Stakeholder engagement is the third theme in this study. Stakeholder engagement refers to the varied activities, relationships, and commitments formed or leveraged to support GEAR UP TN implementation. This theme relates to Research Question 1 with the meaning unit engagement type, suggesting that successful grant implementation requires programmatic and financial support from internal and external interested parties. Whitley defined stakeholder engagement as the “sharing of the information with the communities, inviting the community [stake]holders to the events, letting them know what was going on, and just constantly involving them.” This participant described element awareness and intent as a kinetic process between the site coordinator and the community stakeholders. As found in the interviews, constant communication facilitated a greater connection between the schools and the community stakeholders. The outcomes of increased connection included pride among community stakeholders and fiscal commitments (leveraged resources) toward the schools. Leveraged resources was apparent in Julian’s suggestion that engagement was not “necessarily data-driven, but [that] engagement by community, parents, and students” would lead to grant outcomes. His statement indicated the value placed on the engagement and the utilization of people in the county to achieve grant goals. Leveraged resources also emerged from Lettie’s assertion that district resources were critical to addressing meaning unit problems, cultural barriers that arose during day-to-day operations.

Operational inputs and stakeholder engagement addressed the participants’ view of successful implementation. Operational inputs indicate the actions needed to inform successful
implementation, and stakeholder engagement exemplified the action needed for execution. Moreover, according to the participants, exploring the varied definitions of success indicated positive growth and general improvement in quality of life as indicators of successful implementation. This common goal is significant in transformational leadership studies as it serves as a connector for leaders and followers. Coupled with leadership traits, the connection empowers and mobilizes the efforts required for organizational change (Lussier & Achua, 2010). Research Question 2 was an exploration of the perceived leadership traits that participants deemed impactful with grant implementation.

**Research Question 2**

The second research question was, “What perceived principal and site coordinator leadership traits create effective engagement between community stakeholders and high schools?” This question is related to Question 1 and precedes Question 3 to illustrate the relatedness of transformational leadership and LMX. TLT identifies a common goal and the individual characteristics of a leader interested in addressing a determined social problem (Brown et al., 2020). The findings for Research Questions 1 and 2 support the theory’s relation to individuals’ notions of success and the effective traits needed for grant implementation. Research Question 3 used TLT and LMX theory to explore leadership by identifying the features of the leaders’ relationships and interactions. The interviewees highlighted certain personnel traits they attributed to the effectiveness of engagement and believed would assist in attaining their definition of success. This question comprised the themes of overcoming challenges and stakeholder engagement.
Overcoming Challenges

Overcoming challenges connect to Research Question 2 by detailing participants’ accounts of the attributes or activities allowing them to address hindrances to goal achievement. This section presents the following meaning units of this theme: obligations, attributes, and the solution section of challenges and resolves. Obligation refers to the site coordinator’s sense of duty related to the common goal of increasing postsecondary attainment. Each participating site coordinator reported a strong sense of commitment with varying focuses. The sense of duty was apparent in statements, such as Jelesa feeling “obligated [to] each task on do the job that I was hired to do,” and shifted the site coordinators’ duties beyond traditional work hours or locations. The attributes meaning unit comprised self- and observer-reported character traits that participants identified as essential supports, indicating the traits they found effective.

The elements student-centric, resourceful, and caring constitute attributes. Student-centric describes a persistent focus on ensuring students are successful; resourceful refers to the ability to see opportunities beyond existing programmatic and fiscal supports; and caring pertains to an overall feeling of concern related to student and community outcomes. The solution element of the challenges and resolves meaning unit presented flexibility and data as overarching supports for creating effective engagements. The site coordinator’s and principal’s ability and willingness to adapt to achieve targeted goals appeared as positive traits at the district level.

Ron and Lettie added to flexibility through statements regarding innovative problem-solving. Ron spoke of the site coordinator’s ability “to come up with some amazing ideas that help,” and Lettie mentioned the state’s efforts to come up “with innovative ways to address” some of the challenges in their district. Innovative problem-solving provides a tactical example of the adaptability needed to be successful. Therefore, the obligations, attributes, and solutions
elements found in overcoming challenges support the creation of effective engagement between community stakeholders.

**Stakeholder Engagement**

Stakeholder engagement was apparent through the tactics employed to create agreement among internal and external stakeholders. External communication is the second element in support of communication. Lettie’s statement of “getting out there having conversations letting them know how they can help us meet the needs of our students” showed the site coordinator’s ownership of relationships through communication. Three of the four site coordinators interviewed evidenced ownership in their communication with external stakeholders. Each site coordinator used new and existing technology to communicate with stakeholders outside the school. Technology was also instrumental in the element-leveraged resources, specifically as the interviewees described their interactions with the parent groups. Leveraged resources was apparent in district administrators’ statements of the value placed on the engagement and utilization of people in the county to achieve grant goals. Therefore, the communication and leveraged resource elements found in the engagement meaning unit of stakeholder engagement support creating effective engagement between community stakeholders and high schools.

**Research Question 3**

The final research question was, “What engagement practices were most often used in collaboratives that increased college-going rates by five or more percentage points?” This section shows the connections of the themes, meaning units, and elements to Research Question 3, highlighting the themes’ similarities and differences based on increased college-going rates. The similarities indicate the need for flexibility in participant roles, intentionality and value placed on internal and external relationships, and flair for nuanced work.
County 1A

County 1A saw an increase of 6.2% compared to its 2012 three-year college-going rates baseline. The meaning unit defining success reflected County 1A, according to the relationships established with past and present students and increasing college readiness metrics. According to the meaning unit grant introductions, the district administrator and principal perceived it to be team-led with high principal involvement, whereas the site coordinator identified it as individual-led by the principal. The site coordinator and district administrator commended state-level training as a means to network and learn about other collaboratives; however, the principal did not find them particularly impactful. The principal’s key engagement practices were to be open to others’ thoughts and perspectives; in contrast, the site coordinators practiced caring about students and their future.

County 1B

County 1B saw a decrease of 2.6% compared to its 2012 three-year college-going rates baseline. County 1B defined success as program promotion, sustained effort, and increased college-going rates, as reflected in the meaning unit defining success. According to the meaning unit grant introductions, the site coordinator and principal perceived introductions as individual-led with significant involvement from the principal; in contrast, the district administrator identified introductions as team-led. For the state training meaning unit, the principal, site coordinator, and district administrator appreciated state-level training as a means to network, an opportunity to meet with the internal team without district or school demands, and a guiding tool to support grant training within the county. Key principal engagement practices were intentional with time management and incorporated the multiple implementation tasks into existing school
activities and structures. The key engagement practices for site coordinators were to be selfless and student-centric in their approach to the work.

**County 2**

County 2 showed an increase of 31.2% over its baseline 2012 three-year college-going rates, the largest increase of all studied sites. County 2 defined success as improved quality of life and more opportunities for students, which was apparent in the meaning unit defining success. According to the meaning unit grant introductions, each collaborative member perceived introductions to be individual-led under the responsibility of the site coordinator. The principal’s key engagement practices were related not to active engagement but to the value placed on the required services and promoting the services’ ability to improve students’ and families’ lives. One example of this type of engagement would be teachers turning over their classrooms to ensure service completion. The key engagement practices for site coordinators were associated with the attribute of care and the willingness to exceed expectations.

**County 3**

County 3 saw an increase of 17.5% compared to its 2012 three-year college-going rates baseline, demonstrating success in program promotion, sustained effort, and increased college-going rates. According to the meaning unit grant introductions, the site coordinator and principal perceived introductions as individual-led, whereas the district administrator saw them as team-led. The principal, site coordinator, and district administrator heralded state-level training as a means to network, an opportunity to meet with the internal team without district or school demands, and a guiding tool to support grant training within the county. Key engagement practices for principals were to care and be flexible; in contrast, the site coordinators paid attention to details and were aware of the school’s dynamics.
Overall Significance of Findings

The preliminary findings were not unexpected: Educational administrators care about educating students and parents, want to see individuals succeed academically and in life, and need resources to obtain the goals. As the literature review indicated, the HEA persisted through political, economic, and social changes as a constant construct and symbol of the U.S. government’s attempt to increase educational equality (Keppel, 1987). The HEA’s purpose was simple: to provide financial resources to increase under resourced students’ self-sufficiency and degree attainment. With the information provided by the sample population, the study showed that policy implementation, although fluctuating, yields some success.

A review of the interview data showed that, in line with the study’s intention (see Chapter 1), the findings could help practitioners focus on solutions within their control, better positioning them to address and counter structural hindrances outside of their control. This support was not apparent in the commonalities of project implementation but in the diversity of the studied leadership dynamics. Specifically, the significance of this work showed a struggle to overcome standardized implementation, the notion of the intermediary and not individuals as a transformational leader, and sustainability specific to the limitations of preparing collaboratives to sustain their efforts. This section presents the study’s intention, assumptions, and contribution to the literature by identifying and categorizing leadership factors that, when combined, produce positive gains for students and the GEAR UP staff through recommended policy, practice, and research.

Intermediary as a Transformational Leader

The findings support the intermediary as the transformational leader. All interviewees saw the intermediary as creating a positive future vision (inspirational motivation), exemplifying
behavioral traits both admirable and congruent with the messaging (idealized influence), and providing development-related activities and supports to equip individuals for successful implementation and goal attainment (intellectual stimulation and individualized consideration). The unintended challenge of the intermediary serving as the transformational leader is the heavy reliance on followers ((collaboratives) to institute cultural changes. The opportunity present with the current structure was apparent in this study’s sustainability definition and reference to historic determinism, individuals’ dependence to shape history. These findings were apparent in the literature and its presentation of leaders and followers as incongruent (Burns, 1978; Turner, 2018), with more reliance on charismatic personalities and less on creating structures to sustain the impact. Examples were evident in each collaborative, with three of the four effective principals moving into administrative roles during or after the 2012–2019 funding cycle. Essentially, the principals’ ability to influence the future through present action advanced their careers and created a void in the high school specific to the loss of knowledge and college-access commitment, decreasing participants’ chances of sustainability.

**Sustainability**

Sustainability proved challenging outside of the loss of leadership and alignment with changes in principals. Definitions varied between the intermediary and the collaboratives. The intermediary identified sustainability as an effort to promote the continuation GEAR UP TN objectives. In contrast, the collaboratives saw sustainability as the human capacity to support college access work and improved quality of life for students, their families, and the community. Of note, sustainability also presented as a limitation to this study. An in-depth review of college-going rates and district-level activities post funding is warranted and would yield insight into this topic. Due to the timing of this work, environmental factors could have skewed the data. The
COVID-19 virus affected the collectives’ ability to define normal, including educational terminology, such as rates of attainment, attendance, and participation. The unprecedented impact of COVID-19, though a recommended focus of future research and practice, was beyond the scope of this study.

**Standardized Implementation**

Standardized implementation emerged as problematic for rural and urban communities. In Collaboratives 2 and 3, the restricted nature of funding proved burdensome but did not hinder implementation or goal attainment. Each participating collaborative highly regarded the intermediary’s practices and policies. However, participants from Collaboratives 1A and 1B more often discussed implementation hindrances because of their target population, low-income students of color, district size, and densely populated urban community. Standardized implementation seemed to create a cautious sense of us-versus-them with the intermediary. The ability to overcome the hindrances stemmed from the in-group dynamics, informal sharing of information and roles, and relationships. The informal relational structure of the in-group is a vital contributor to information-sharing within an organization (Wang & Ahmed, 2003), which is essential for endorsing cultural development. In essence, the feeling of being misunderstood and different (out-group dynamics) strengthened the leadership team’s in-group dynamics.

**Recommendations**

This study on GEAR UP leadership traits indicates the need for stakeholder action. There are significant implications for practice, research, and policy.

**Recommendations for Practice**

Related to sustainability, this study resulted in two recommendations for practice for two stakeholder groups, collaborative teams and intermediary agencies.
**Collaborative Teams (Internal and External Stakeholders)**

The participants referenced the need for an individual to sustain the efforts implemented during the grant funding cycle. Although each collaborative’s participants identified the need for sustainability at the district and school levels, they did not have a plan to address the need. One recommendation is for the collaborative teams to allocate a portion of indirect costs and leverage the relationships developed during implementation to hire a college access professional. The indirect cost rate is a fee that districts can charge against grant funds to offset administrative costs. The funds are unrestricted, often applied to organizations’ general ledger as a source of revenue. This funding can help lessen the district’s burden of covering the salary and benefits of an employee to support college access work.

**Intermediary Agencies**

Intermediary agencies provide additional and intentional training and resources to help districts plan to sustain their efforts. The training includes prescriptive agenda topics, scripts, and slides for stakeholders; early sessions on state funding sources that support but do not replace program implementation; and superintendent sessions that speak to the impact of sustainability.

**Recommendations for Research**

This study’s recommendations for research apply to two stakeholders, collaborative teams and higher education agencies.

Collaboratives are internal and external partnerships that interact to increase college-going rates. During my THEC tenure, one of the most impactful partnerships I observed was between the site coordinator and the higher education agency postsecondary contact, which streamlined the unintuitive college-going process. The postsecondary contact role varied by institution but included roles such as TRIO professionals, recruitment officers, Financial Aid...
Counselors, alumni of the respective high schools and site directors. Mediated by these relationships, students were more comfortable, better resourced (cognitively and fiscally), and better prepared for their college experience. The recommendation for this partnership is to document impact and processes and encourage greater engagement in engaged scholarship. Impact documentation could provide support for funding and advocacy, reducing the knowledge loss from staff changes and the reliance on personalities to sustain grant implementation efforts.

**Recommendations for Policy**

The study’s two policy recommendations apply to intermediary agencies and elected officials.

The literature review showed instances of public policies failing to achieve the objective of decreasing inequities (Ingram et al., 2007). Intermediaries that receive federal funding for project implementation are uniquely positioned to address inequities, and in this study, they do. The primary inequity addressed was postsecondary access for students who received free and reduced lunch. The intermediary successfully increased college-going rates by nine percentage points, an incredible feat worthy of accolades. However, it does not intentionally focus on the inequities in counties serving large numbers of minorities or include metrics to address the disparities among race and gender.

As a recommendation congressional policymakers and state officiants responsible for grant procedures should include metrics that benchmark decreases in race and gender inequity in their requests for proposals and grant-making processes. Individuals inspect what they expect. If there is a desire to address inequity in education, policymakers should hold everyone accountable for doing so. Compiling metrics could transform the us-versus-them mentality into the “we” perspective needed to improve educational outcomes for all students. Related to sustainability,
another recommendation is to determine increases in relationships and funding sources to sustain the work postimplementation as a measure of success. Incorporating these metrics would resolve the interviewees’ concerns that the intermediary notion of growth and improvement is only about the numbers. Moreover, expanding the metrics would make the definition of success more personal, aligning metrics and positioning collaboratives for future, sustained success.

Summary and Conclusions

This study was an exploration of leaders’ implementation practices to increase college-going rates. Semistructured interviews with 12 participants provided the data to answer three research questions:

1. How do principals and site coordinators of GEAR UP TN – West communities define successful collaboration with nonprofits and higher education institutions?
2. What perceived principal and site coordinator leadership traits create effective engagement between community stakeholders and high schools?
3. What engagement practices were most often used in collaboratives that increased college-going rates by five or more percentage points?

The participants identified operational inputs, stakeholder engagement, and overcoming challenges as themes and responses to the research questions. The leadership literature mostly aligned with the leadership traits and practices identified and observed by the interviewees, with differences showing the intermediary’s role as a transformational leader and the topic of sustainability. Based on the study’s findings and the literature, there is a need for increased accountability to awarded K-12 systems in grant implementation from the intermediary, collaborative teams, and policymakers. The three recommended actions for increased
accountability are suggestions to address education inequities, increase resources and develop support for future practitioners.
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