

Article

Generational Memory and an Examination of Self-Leadership in Administrators of Reformed U.S. Protestant Universities

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Abstract

Senior leadership turnover in Christian Higher Education Institutions (CHEIs) necessitates the identification of effective self-leadership practices that preserve intergenerational memory and Reformed traditions. Using a qualitative interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), this study explored the lived experiences of five senior-level administrators averaging 22.2 years of leadership experience in CHEIs. The findings identified five core themes shaping their leadership: (1) efficiency and Self-Awareness, characterized by the use of digital boundaries and organizational systems; (2) fulfillment, derived from a deep sense of “calling” and the institutional mission; (3) fortitude, built on theological principles of God’s sovereignty to navigate administrative stress; (4) applicability and Intellectualism, rooted in the Reformed confessional heritage and “treasure trove” of creeds; and (5) integration, where spiritual practices, such as breath prayers and scripture-based cues, are woven into professional routines. Crucially, the research revealed a significant disconnect where leaders utilized robust self-leadership strategies for professional growth but often struggled to apply parallel techniques (such as goal setting or self-observation) to their personal spiritual disciplines. The study concludes by proposing a Spiritual Self-Leadership Framework that integrates the Five Solas of the Reformation with self-leadership theory to provide a roadmap for individual sanctification and institutional flourishing.

Keywords: genealogy; higher education; intergenerational memory; leadership; reformed church

1. Introduction

Reformed Protestant Christianity has historically served as a global cornerstone for higher education, yet many institutions founded on these principles now face an identity crisis as they navigate a modern “confluence of missional, cultural, and economic threats” (Hulme et al. 2016; James 2021). While a remnant of U.S. colleges remains steadfast in their commitment to Protestant evangelicalism, these Reformed Christian Higher Education Institutions (CHEIs) are currently entering a period of unprecedented transition. As the current demographic of presidents and senior administrators nears retirement age, the industry anticipates a significant “impending wave” of leadership turnover (Adams 2021; Barton 2019; Elliott 2021). Successfully navigating this transition requires more than technical management; it demands leaders who can bridge the divide between secular administrative pressures and the preservation of intergenerational theological memory.

Self-leadership theory is the process through which individuals manage their own thoughts and behaviors to enhance personal effectiveness (Neck et al. 2019), and it offers a robust framework for this challenge. While scholarship has extensively examined self-



Received: 15 May 2026

Revised: 21 July 2026

Accepted: 23 July 2026

Published: 30 July 2026

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leadership in corporate, international, and general academic staff contexts, its application among the senior-most leaders of faith-based institutions has remained largely overlooked.

To contribute insights into leadership experiences in explicitly Reformed institutions, this study provides guidance to institutional search committees, trustees, and boards of directors by identifying factors in candidates' self-leadership that contribute to successful leadership in Christian higher education (Kaak 2021). The findings also provide guidance to those in CHEIs involved in leadership and spiritual development, emphasizing the importance of nurturing individualized habits of self-leadership in keeping with the Reformed Church.

1.1. Background and Context

In the current landscape of Christian higher education in the United States, familiar challenges persist alongside new ones, posing both threats and opportunities for colleges and universities (James 2021). Missional, cultural, economic, and governmental challenges continually impact CHEI (Hulme et al. 2016). For Reformed Christian universities, these challenges are compounded by the responsibility to preserve a distinctive theological identity. Leaders must navigate contemporary questions while maintaining fidelity to a tradition that understands all of life, including intellectual inquiry, work, education, and institutional leadership, as occurring under the lordship of Christ.

This context places unusual demands upon senior administrators. Presidents, provosts, and vice presidents must simultaneously function as organizational strategists, financial stewards, institutional representatives, spiritual leaders, and guardians of mission. Their effectiveness depends not only upon their ability to lead others but also upon their capacity to regulate their own behaviors, thoughts, emotions, and motivations.

The impending transition of senior leaders therefore raises concerns beyond succession planning. Leadership turnover may also affect the continuity of institutional memory. When experienced administrators leave, institutions may lose not only technical knowledge but also embodied knowledge concerning why institutional practices exist, how theological convictions have historically shaped decision-making, and how the institution understands its relationship to church, academy, and society.

1.2. Research Problem

The weight of leadership in modern CHEIs has been exacerbated by the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in revenue losses, political polarization, and increased stakeholder scrutiny. Existing leadership scholarship has examined transformational, servant, and authentic leadership in Christian contexts, but these approaches often emphasize the relationship between leaders and followers. Less attention has been given to the internal influence processes through which senior administrators sustain their own professional effectiveness, resilience, and spiritual formation. This gap is particularly notable in Reformed Christian higher education. Although Reformed theology offers a rich tradition concerning vocation, work, Scripture, grace, providence, and human flourishing, limited empirical research has examined how these theological commitments shape the self-leadership practices of senior university administrators.

Therefore, this study addresses the need to explore self-leadership in the context of Reformed Christian universities, focusing on the unique challenges and opportunities presented by their theological and doctrinal foundations (Collins and Clanton 2018; Dahlvig 2018; Ewert 2007) as Reformed Christian academic communities seek to maintain a solid and distinct identity to effectively engage with and serve the church, the academy, and society at large. The study also examined the potential relationship between pro-

fessional self-leadership, spiritual formation, and the preservation of intergenerational theological memory.

1.3. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is self-leadership theory, a normative concept first established by Charles Manz in the 1980s that has evolved from simple self-management into a robust process of self-influence aimed at pursuing higher meaning and purpose (Neck et al. 2019). Unlike traditional leadership theories that focus on the leader-follower dynamic (e.g., transformational or servant leadership), self-leadership designates the individual as both the initiator and the target of self-direction and self-motivation to perform tasks at a higher level (Neck et al. 2019). As argued by Cockerell (2020), self-leadership is an essential leadership component specifically for professionals in positions of authority, providing the internal foundation necessary to lead others effectively.

According to the model most widely used today, established by Neck and Houghton (2006) and further refined by Neck et al. (2019), self-leadership comprises three primary strategy domains that work together to generate effective leadership patterns:

1. Behavior-Focused Strategies. These strategies increase self-awareness to facilitate the management of necessary but unpleasant tasks. They include world-altering strategies (modifying the physical environment) and self-imposed strategies like self-observation and self-goal setting.
2. Natural Reward-Focused Strategies. These involve identifying and leveraging activities that are intrinsically motivating, inducing feelings of competence, self-determination, and purpose.
3. Constructive Thought Pattern Strategies. This domain emphasizes the transformative power of intentional thinking, specifically the use of positive self-talk, mental imagery, and opportunity thinking—reframing obstacles as learning experiences.

Deepening this discourse, recent research has positioned self-leadership not as a replacement for classic theories like transformational or servant leadership, but as a “normative enhancement” to a professional’s existing style. Goldsby et al. (2021) proposed a novel meta-performance model, suggesting that self-leadership is a prominent process for enhancing performance outcomes when integrated with established professional training. Furthermore, a meta-analysis by Knotts et al. (2022) highlights the unique positioning of self-leadership in its ability to influence individual attitudes and outcomes through a proactive “inside-out” approach, distinguishing it from other motivational concepts like self-efficacy.

Justification and Application in the Reformed Context

In the specific context of Reformed Christian Higher Education Institutions (CHEIs), self-leadership theory provides an ideal lens for understanding how administrators manage the weight of their responsibilities. As noted by Neck et al. (2019), if leaders are not competent self-leaders, their capacity for managing stress and influencing others is diminished.

This study applies the framework to bridge the identified “asymmetry” in leadership practice—where administrators are proficient in professional self-leadership but struggle to apply parallel strategies to their spiritual formation. By integrating the Five Solas of the Reformation with the strategies of Neck et al. (2019), this study proposes a Spiritual Self-Leadership Framework. In this model, theological pillars like *Sola Fide* (Faith Alone) provide the cognitive freedom required for honest self-observation, ultimately serving the goal of individual sanctification and *Soli Deo Gloria* (God’s Glory Alone).

2. Methodology & Research Design

The choice of a qualitative methodology for investigating the role of self-leadership in Reformed Christian higher education leadership is supported by several factors. Creswell and Creswell (2017) identified key characteristics of qualitative research that align with the goals of this study. Qualitative research centers on deriving meaning from individuals concerning the subject of inquiry, placing importance on their individual judgments (Creswell and Creswell 2017). It seeks to comprehend the nature of reality and the phenomena under investigation through the qualitative research lens (Creswell and Creswell 2017).

This study utilized a qualitative interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to explore the lived experiences of senior-level administrators in U.S. Reformed Christian universities. IPA was selected for its idiographic focus, allowing for a deep, nuanced exploration of how individuals make sense of their professional self-leadership and personal spiritual formation within a specific theological context.

2.1. Participants and Site Selection

The study involved five senior-level administrators (Provosts and Vice Presidents) from institutions affiliated with the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCCU) that maintain an explicit Reformed commitment. Participants had an average of 22.2 years of experience in Christian higher education leadership. Purposeful sampling was employed to ensure a homogeneous group whose experiences directly aligned with the research questions. The criteria required that participants hold a senior-level leadership position (President, Provost, or Vice President) at a U.S. Reformed Christian college or university affiliated with the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCCU) and have a minimum of five years of experience in Christian higher education leadership.

The recruitment process involved identifying institutions through the CCCC database that maintained an explicit Reformed commitment. Initial contact was made via email to two male and two female senior-level employees at each target institution to identify willing participants who met the inclusion criteria. Ultimately, five administrators, four men and one woman, participated in the study, representing a range of 10 to 40 years of leadership experience (Table 1).

Table 1. Participant Demographics.

Participant Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Location	Nationality	Years in CHEIs	Highest Degree
Amy	50	F	Midwest	U.S. Citizen	19	PhD
Dave	56	M	Midwest	U.S. Citizen	24	PhD
Harrison	71	M	Northeast	U.S./Canadian	40	EdD
Max	37	M	Northeast	Dutch/Canadian	10	MA
Simon	46	M	Midwest	U.S. Citizen	18	PhD

2.2. Data Collection

A brief survey was used to gather contextual data on age, gender, work history, and denominational affiliation. Participants completed a reflective exercise based on the three strategy domains of self-leadership theory (behavioral, natural reward, and cognitive), which served as a primer for the in-depth discussion. The primary data collection tool was a 60 min semistructured interview conducted via Zoom. The interview guide consisted of 15 broad, open-ended questions designed to facilitate a double-hermeneutic dialogue between the researcher and the participant. Each interview question aligned with a research question, which offered me the opportunity to weave in purposeful follow-up questions to add depth and rich information (Smith and Nizza 2022). The flexible format of the interview

instrument prioritized adaptability to promote participant comfort and robust recall. After receiving the participants' explicit verbal and written consent, all the interviews were audio-visually recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis. During these live sessions, I recorded detailed field notes to capture non-verbal cues, immediate insights, and emotional inflections that might not be fully represented in a text-only transcript.

2.2.1. Data Analysis

The process of moving from recorded media to thematic findings followed a meticulous, manual, and iterative four-step approach, outlined by [Smith and Nizza \(2022\)](#), designed to maintain the integrity of the participants' narratives. I personally conducted verbatim transcription of every interview, relistening to recordings multiple times to ensure absolute accuracy and to immerse myself deeply in the data. This manual process was chosen over automated software specifically to maintain a deep connection to the participants' "sense-making" process whilst giving me the opportunity to focus on verbatim words, metaphors, and non-verbal cues. Initial analysis involved exploratory note-taking directly in the margins of the transcripts, identifying magnifications, contradictions, and metaphors which were then distilled into experiential statements to capture the essence of what each administrator was experiencing. I employed in vivo coding, utilizing the participants' own words or short phrases as the primary units of analysis, which were organized chronologically and clustered into groups of likeness based on their relationship to the five research subquestions, while memos were written to identify connections, contradictions, and unexpected findings. Finally, these clusters were cross-analyzed across all five participants to identify the superordinate themes. To merit the final conclusions, every theme presented in the findings was required to be supported by data from at least three of the five participants and remained strictly grounded in direct, verbatim quotations.

Trustworthiness & Ethical Considerations

This research was conducted with the approval of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of West Florida. Before any data collection occurred, all the participants were provided with a formal Informed Consent Form detailing the study's purpose, procedures, and potential risks. Participants also signed a Recorded Media Addendum, granting permission for audio-visual recording via Zoom with the understanding that they could disable their video at any time.

To protect the identity of participants within a limited professional network, several rigorous safeguards were employed:

- All the participants were assigned unique pseudonyms (e.g., Amy, Dave, Harrison, Max, and Simon).
- Personal identifiers and signed consent forms were stored separately from the interview data.
- Digital files were maintained in password-protected formats on secure, malware-protected hardware.
- Personally identifiable data will be retained for a minimum of three years following the study's completion, after which all the electronic files will be permanently deleted and paper documents shredded.
- To ensure the accuracy of the researcher's interpretations and to prevent misrepresentation, participants were given the opportunity to review and confirm the analysis of their respective interviews.

2.2.2. Key Findings

The findings of this study indicate that senior-level administrators in Reformed Christian higher education employ a sophisticated combination of self-leadership strategies that are deeply informed by their theological convictions. Consistent with the three domains of self-leadership theory, participants demonstrated behavior-focused, natural reward-focused, and constructive thought pattern strategies that enabled them to navigate the complex demands of institutional leadership. At the same time, the findings revealed a significant disconnect between the application of these strategies in professional leadership and their intentional use in personal spiritual formation.

Behavior-Focused Strategies: Self-Regulation and Intentional Practice

Participants consistently employed behavior-focused strategies to manage competing demands, maintain effectiveness, and cultivate self-awareness. Leaders intentionally shaped their environments by establishing “digital bumpers,” limiting technological interruptions, and protecting Sabbath observance and family time. These practices created intellectual and emotional space necessary for sustained leadership. They relied on structured planning systems, including physical and digital task lists, to distinguish essential responsibilities from less critical demands. Although some tasks remained incomplete, leaders emphasized ensuring that “critical balls” were never dropped. Lastly, participants demonstrated intentional self-monitoring by identifying personal weaknesses and implementing strategies for improvement. Examples included tracking emotional responses through journals, seeking targeted professional development, and engaging leadership literature and podcasts to refine behaviors and decision-making.

Natural Reward Strategies: Calling and Relational Fulfillment

Participants derived their primary motivation from intrinsic rather than external rewards, demonstrating a strong alignment between vocational purpose and self-leadership. They consistently described leadership in Christian higher education as a divine calling rather than simply a profession. This sense of vocation provided resilience, purpose, and sustained motivation despite significant institutional pressures. Leaders also experienced fulfillment through investing in the growth of others. Helping faculty, staff, and students flourish emerged as a significant source of intrinsic satisfaction, reinforcing their commitment to collaborative leadership rather than personal recognition.

Constructive Thought Pattern Strategies: Theological Resilience

The most distinctive findings emerged within the cognitive domain, where participants employed theological convictions to interpret challenges and sustain resilience. Firstly, participants consistently interpreted institutional challenges—including financial pressures, personnel conflicts, and organizational uncertainty—through the doctrine of God’s sovereignty. Rather than viewing these experiences as insurmountable obstacles, they reframed them as opportunities for faithful stewardship, demonstrating a form of theological resilience grounded in trust that “nothing is a surprise to God.” Participants also described intentional practices of self-reflection and internal dialogue that promoted perseverance and emotional stability. Grounded in the doctrine of *Sola Fide*, they resisted performance-based guilt by extending to themselves the same grace they would offer to colleagues, thereby reducing self-condemnation and encouraging continued growth.

Professional Competence and Spiritual Integration

The central finding of this study was the identification of an asymmetry between professional self-leadership and personal spiritual formation. Although participants demon-

strated sophisticated behavioral, motivational, and cognitive self-leadership strategies in their administrative responsibilities, many struggled to intentionally apply these same practices to their own spiritual lives. Rather than approaching spiritual disciplines with the same strategic intentionality they brought to institutional leadership, participants frequently interpreted inconsistency as personal failure instead of an opportunity for growth in sanctification. This disconnect represents the study's most significant contribution and provided the foundation for the development of the Spiritual Self-Leadership Framework, which seeks to integrate professional excellence with intentional spiritual formation.

3. Emergent Themes

3.1. Efficiency

Participants employed a variety of intentional behaviors to enhance their self-leadership capabilities, and each behavior played a crucial role in helping the leaders manage their professional responsibilities while maintaining personal well-being. Research confirms that many of their behaviors (e.g., using digital tools, prioritizing, implementing systems, planning ahead, and goal setting) are proactive strategies to alter behaviors, thoughts, and outcomes (Knotts et al. 2022). Each of these strategies contributed to the leaders' professional productivity and efficiency to successfully manage their large workloads (Knotts et al. 2022).

Participants referenced digital tools both positively and negatively in terms of efficiency. As a positive tool to aid and streamline their workload, two participants said that they could easily and quickly use the Notes app on their phones to help keep track of the various things they needed to remember, and one participant spoke about using their phone as a timer to dedicate specific time toward a task they needed to complete. Consistent with the perspectives offered by Neck et al. (2019), the use of reminders and attention focusers involved identifying physical cues, such as to-do lists or strategically placed objects, to optimize focus and guide daily activities.

Part of the motivation for efficiency in their work lay in participants' commitment to having some sort of boundaries and barriers around when they chose not to work. For example, Dave set boundaries on his digital tools by not being "accessible professionally" on his cell phone. He said, "There are not a lot of people who have my cell phone." He said that he was "not a big weekend worker" and was purposeful about giving himself "intellectual space management," and not letting work impinge excessively "on time with my family." Dave detailed that he came into the office every morning at seven, usually worked through lunch, and was home by six. His efficiency at work allowed him to keep a "big wall around the weekend," and he said he tried to consistently "have boundaries around when I do my work." These findings were supported by Williams and McCombs (2023), who discussed the essential role of self-leadership for leaders in balancing work, family, and professional development.

Many participants mentioned the "protection" they put around their personal lives. Despite still being reachable and available, Simon said he was "in a different mode at home" and that his wife needed him to be ready for his responsibilities as a husband and father. Contrary to Dave's experience, when asked if, besides protecting the Sabbath wholeheartedly, there were other self-imposed parameters or protections, Simon laughed through his "no." He explained that he chose not to add any additional guardrails to his Sunday rest due to the institution's immense needs. He said:

I have seasons where I, I don't have that balance at all. Like right now is one of those times; it just isn't there and that's okay. The job requires something right now. . . to give beyond. . . I'll have seasons where the other 6 days feel balanced. I could have years at a time where the other 6 days feel balanced.

The continued financial aftermath of the COVID-19 global pandemic and the increase in mergers and acquisitions among both smaller and larger institutions (Nakra 2021) no doubt played a role in the need participants expressed “to give beyond.” With a different experience, Harrison said he rarely works at home anymore. He recalled that he came to a point of realization in his career and said there were “bumpers that I had to put on my professional life and family life” so that when he was home he was “fully home.” The literature reflected the data on prioritizing balance and highlighted CHEIs’ earnest desire to support faculty and staff as they strove to achieve a healthy balance between their personal and professional lives and foster individual growth (Matthias 2019). These insights underscore the need for effective self-leadership practices that not only enhance productivity but also nurture personal well-being in the demanding landscape of senior-level leadership at CHEI.

Several participants used the behavior-focused strategy of making lists to prioritize their work. Dave articulated the specific routine of making a list in the evening about the things that needed to be done the next day because “inevitably there will be things that interrupt me that I’ll be distracted by, and so I’ll try to make sure those things that must get done get done”

This evaluation was crucial for advancing the college’s mission and ensuring its financial stability (James 2021; Pedro and Kumar 2020). Choosing which needs to be addressed and which needs to sunset required a strategic mind able to efficiently identify immediate demands and long-term goals that aligned with the college’s mission and its capacity for change. To further enhance this theme, Harrison’s practical approach demonstrates the long-term nature of efficiency. He emphasized the necessity of foresight to avoid burnout, stating, “Plan your year so that you’re not reinventing the wheel every year”. He modeled this by scheduling donor visits and institutional trips during the same months year-over-year to maintain professional momentum without unnecessary administrative friction.

Surprisingly, not many participants articulated clear systems for their self-leadership. There were vague references to “structures being put in place,” “using different systems all the time,” and “organizing my work,” without defining what those phrases meant. However, Amy had an especially insightful section on systems when she reflected:

When I first started as the dean in 2012, every day I was printing out my calendar and had a huge spreadsheet with a master list of tasks. And then for this project there’s a tab that has smaller things to work. . . I got to where I just didn’t need to do that anymore because I knew what they were.

This emphasized the continual development of systems and behaviors and demonstrated how efficiency and capacity build over time and with experience. Similarly, Simon talked about using a specific planner and approach because of a time when he felt overwhelmed, and he realized, “I can’t do this. I can’t approach my job the way I’ve been. I need some system.” Participants like Simon and Amy recognized that as their leadership responsibilities grew, they grew beyond themselves and needed resources or systems or tools to help them flourish efficiently. This personal transformation aligned with transformational leadership theory, which emphasized leaders modeling a commitment to growth and adaptability to better meet the demands of their roles and support their personal and professional development (Burns 1978).

Each participant spoke on the importance of goal setting and planning ahead for success in their leadership roles. The consistency between this study’s findings and those of Neck et al. (2019) highlighted how behavior-focused strategies, such as goal setting, increased self-awareness to facilitate behavioral management of necessary but unpleasant tasks.

3.2. Self-Awareness

When discussing the behavioral strategies they employed to achieve success, participants strongly emphasized the importance of self-development through self-awareness. Strong self-leadership was predicated on an administrator's ability to identify and mitigate personal weaknesses. Simon's commitment to continuous improvement provides a clear example of this self-development in action. He utilized an executive coach to conduct a "360 review" and created a specific action plan based on his perceived growth areas, admitting, "I'm not as good as I want to be. . . I'm always trying to get better at that". Findings such as these supported the existing literature on authentic leadership, which has focused on leaders' internal positive psychological capacities, specifically self-awareness (Frederick, 2015; Walumbwa et al. 2008). For example, woven throughout each interview, participants discussed their ability to identify areas of perceived weakness or interest. They detailed specific books or podcasts that they were consuming and applying to mitigate those weaknesses or expand those interests into areas of expertise. Additionally, participants mentioned their love of reading. Amy was a voracious reader, consuming 50–55 books a year. Harrison, Amy, and Dave reflected on the joy of not just reading things that developed them professionally, but also enjoying biographies, fiction, and books on spiritual formation, sociology, and psychology.

Interestingly, participants repeated strong self-observations and clear articulations of who they were and who they were not. The literature detailing prominent leadership theories in Christian higher education, which emphasize leaders' internal positive psychological capacities, such as self-awareness, supported these findings (Karadag and Oztekin-Bayir 2018).

3.3. Fulfillment

Rather than being solely focused on individual degree attainment, Christian higher education seeks to integrate faith into all aspects of education and life, leading to personal and societal transformation for the glory of God and the betterment of humanity in this life and the life to come (Collins and Clanton 2018). From this, the theme of experiencing fulfillment in working in Christian higher education emerged inductively from the participants' interview responses and supplemental documents. All the participants strongly emphasized and repeated messages about passion for Christian higher education and expressed their commitment to "moving this mission forward," a sentiment echoed by both Dave and Harrison. Max further underscored his contentment in service to CHEIs by expressing a willingness to undertake "almost any job on my cabinet." Amy's passion manifested itself in impact when she asked herself, "What are the biggest, most significant things that we want to have an impact on this place?" Max emphasized, "The mission of Christian higher education allows me to see them as a whole person and to keep the students front and center," and he believed in the power of Christian higher education to transform students' lives.

Participants also saw their roles in Christian higher education as entwined with a higher purpose, which was "certainly a motivator" for many of them. Many participants discussed how fulfilling the relational aspects of their roles in Christian higher education were. These results reinforced Burch et al.'s (2015) assertion that servant leaders empower individuals through mutual trust and shared vision, and that they chiefly view their leadership positions as a means of service. Participants' perceptions of autonomy in their roles varied significantly. Some described a "high level of independence," particularly in cabinet-level leadership, highlighting their president's approach as fostering autonomy and, in turn, fulfillment. In speaking of the flexibility, autonomy, and creativity he was afforded in his role, Max summarized by saying, "we live in a permission-granting culture, not a no culture." Conversely, Simon expressed a strongly contrasting view, lamenting, "very

little autonomy, and that everything is more or less driven by the governance apparatus of the institution.” He said “in a role like this, people outside the role may perceive it as having a lot of autonomy, but it doesn’t. Faculty has that autonomy, and provosts don’t.” This variance in perceived autonomy underscored how engaging in naturally rewarding activities, which often include autonomy and self-determination, can influence one’s sense of competence and purpose (Neck et al. 2019).

3.4. Autonomy

Part of the fulfillment participants experienced stemmed from using their competencies. Illustrating his leadership expertise, Harrison stated, “Even though I have all the administrative parts of leadership, I will still see more people than anyone else on my team.” Similarly, part of Amy’s diligence in her spiritual disciplines was motivated by her expectation that her faculty would consistently pursue the means of grace. She asks them about their personal habits of daily scripture reading and prayer. Her competency as a self-leader in spiritual formation afforded her the platform and fueled her passion for cultivating it among her faculty. This commitment to personal integrity and consistency in their practices reflected the essence of authentic leadership (Frederick 2015; Walumbwa et al. 2008).

Authentic leaders are characterized by their self-awareness, transparency, and alignment between their values and actions (Walumbwa et al. 2008). By embodying these principles, Harrison and Amy not only fulfilled their roles effectively but also inspired and modeled these values for their teams. Their genuine engagement with their competencies and spiritual practices underscored their authenticity, enhancing their leadership impact and fostering a more meaningful, connected work environment. Additionally, this approach aligned with the findings of White et al. (2017), who argued that professors who exhibit transformational leadership characteristics, such as personal integrity and commitment to spiritual growth, can significantly impact student spiritual development. Therefore, by modeling these values, Amy not only fulfilled her role effectively but also fostered an environment where her faculty could experience similar transformative growth that, in turn, would result in student transformation and growth.

Surprisingly, in this study, only one participant reported feelings of insecurity and overwhelm regarding their competency in their role. Despite Dave also very clearly articulating his success in the role, toward the end of the interview, he revealed:

I struggle with feeling like I’m actually doing a good job many days. The things that come across my desk are sufficiently complicated. . . It can’t just be solved. . . It’s one more big hot mess.

Despite this participant’s experience of fulfillment and professional competency, this reflection underscored the complex relationship between self-perception, external success, and emotional well-being in leadership roles. This internal struggle was particularly salient in the context of the current weightiness of the Christian higher education landscape. As noted by Dockery (2019) and Rine (2019), society is placing growing scrutiny on and questioning the value of Christian higher education amid broader debates about the role and effectiveness of higher education as a whole. In light of these external pressures and expectations, the participants’ insecurities reflected a broader tension that leaders face as they navigate their roles amid evolving institutional challenges and societal critiques.

3.5. Fortitude

An interesting pattern among these leaders was the necessity of internal strength and resilience. Participants notably integrated their theological perspectives into their mental strategies to cultivate mental fortitude. Harrison, reflecting on his ability to compartmental-

ize work stresses, attributed it to his faith, noting, “nothing is a surprise to God,” and “He will move it forward as he sees fit.” He also emphasized divine purpose in all endeavors, stating, “our work, that is His work. . . will not return void, but will accomplish what He intends.” Simon similarly grounded himself in theological reassurance, affirming, “it is all equally important before God,” to maintain perspective on the significance of his seemingly insignificant tasks. Because of their understanding of God’s sovereignty, they allowed their “work minds” to rest. Whether through Amy’s fictional audiobook or Simon’s parents’ meeting about football, the leaders were purposeful about ensuring that they said, “I don’t think about work all the time.” This approach aligned with the literature, which highlighted that understanding and embracing God’s sovereignty and goodness provides a foundational framework for managing stress and maintaining perspective. According to Ziegler (2020), God’s sovereignty and goodness were central themes that underpinned leaders’ mental and spiritual resilience. By anchoring their mental strategies in these theological principles, these leaders effectively navigated the complexities of their roles, demonstrating how faith-based perspectives can fortify mental and emotional resilience. They also demonstrate patience and a trust that truth and time walk hand in hand. Amy’s perspective provides a practical example of the cognitive reframing required to handle long-term stress. She utilized internal dialogue to manage the weight of complex projects, frequently reminding herself: “We didn’t get here in an hour. We’re not going to fix it in an hour, a day, a week, or a month”.

Participants demonstrated strong historical knowledge and memory of the Protestant tradition, which they viewed as both advantageous and challenging. Amy recognized the good in her rapid cognitive processing, acknowledging it allowed her to handle multiple tasks simultaneously. She said, “I’ve been blessed with the kind of mind that can just deal with countless number of things at one time and keep them all moving.” Yet she also actively worked to balance this trait so that she did not solve problems that others needed to solve. Concerning this, she said, “Is that mine to do, or is the other person across the table? They need to be learning how to think about that, and do I need to just keep quiet and let them do that?” Harrison said, “Other people would say I do a lot,” and when referencing his retirement, he said they say, “we will have to hire three replacements.”

3.6. Applicability

The practicality and functionality of the Reformed faith tradition significantly influenced participants’ work lives and aligned with the concept of *solī Deo gloria*, which underscores the motivation behind the Reformation’s investment in all things—including education, missions, and social welfare (Franklin 2018; Haemig 2017; Laabs 2017). Amy acknowledged that her competency was tied to her theology and stated that God was equipping her and others for the work He had assigned to them. Her Reformed faith functioned in her work life as she said, “The greatest commandment is ‘love God and love your neighbor as yourself,’ and your work is a way to do that,” and “He’s given us good work to do.” Harrison also talked about the functionality of Reformed faith in work when he said, “Work is a good thing. . . we are to set our minds on Christ, and our work and our relationships are to reflect that,” and “we need to be responsible. . . to do our work well, and that honors Him (God).” Participants argued that the Reformed faith was not a sterile doctrine but a functional standard for professional excellence. Max’s voice is particularly strong here, as he noted that a serious commitment to this tradition elevates the quality of administrative work. He stated, “I truly think that if taken seriously, a Reformed view of the world sets an unbearably high standard because you can’t slack off on any part of your work”. Last, Simon’s theological application at work was understanding that all vocations, whether religious or not, were worthy callings.

3.7. Intellectualism

Consistent with the observations of Atherton (2018) and Clémot (2020), the data revealed that the intellectual tradition and creedal confessions of the Reformed Christian tradition profoundly influenced participants' self-leadership. Throughout the interviews, participants frequently cited key figures and foundational documents central to Reformed theology. These include writings by Martin Luther, Alistair Begg, John Calvin, Abraham Kuyper, the Belgic Confession, the Canons of Dort, the Heidelberg catechism, and "creeds like the Westminster Confession". Dave said, "The deep affinity that I have for the Reformed theological approach and Christian faith is that it is deeply shaped by intellectual engagement." Harrison said, "Reformed believers are deeply committed to scripture." Amy mentioned Reformed theology's profound influence on language, learning, and literacy (Leininger 2017; Strier 2017) when she said, "There's this tradition of reading closely, and the preaching happens in an expository way. You pay attention to the scriptures and see how they converse with one another and are consistent with one another." She also pointed out that people love to have things in writing, so "there's this history of working out our doctrines in this way, and then thinking a lot about our piety in this way. There's just such a rich treasure trove of resources." This alignment highlighted how the Reformed tradition's commitment to scripture and intellectual rigor supports and enhances participants' leadership approaches and practices.

Throughout the interviews, participants made Reformed theological statements in their responses to the interview questions. Several touched on their theology of work. The data aligned with Franklin's (2018) assertion that Reformed believers hold firmly to the divine inspiration and authority of the Bible, and Wirz's (2018) view of the centrality of scripture as a lasting gift of the Reformation. Participants' emphasis on scriptural principles in their responses underscored the enduring significance of these theological tenets.

4. Conclusions

This study explored the lived experiences of senior-level administrators in Reformed Christian higher education through the lens of self-leadership theory. The findings demonstrate that these leaders employ sophisticated behavioral, cognitive, and motivational self-leadership strategies to navigate the complex demands of institutional leadership. At the same time, the study revealed an important asymmetry: although participants consistently applied self-leadership principles to their professional responsibilities, they often struggled to intentionally apply those same principles to their personal spiritual formation. This disconnect represents the study's central finding and extends current understandings of self-leadership within faith-based leadership contexts.

The findings further demonstrate that Reformed theology functions as more than a historical tradition or doctrinal system. Participants consistently described theological convictions as practical resources that shaped decision-making, emotional resilience, and meaning-making. Behavioral strategies such as environmental structuring, prioritization, and intentional boundary setting enabled leaders to manage the competing demands of contemporary higher education. Likewise, participants' strong sense of vocational calling functioned as a natural reward strategy that sustained intrinsic motivation despite increasing institutional pressures. Most notably, the doctrine of God's sovereignty emerged as a constructive cognitive strategy through which administrators reframed organizational crises, uncertainty, and conflict into opportunities for faithful stewardship rather than sources of discouragement.

The principal theoretical contribution of this research is the proposed Spiritual Self-Leadership Framework (see Figure 1), which extends traditional self-leadership theory by integrating the Five Solas of the Reformation as theological anchors for self-influence.

Rather than viewing self-leadership as merely a collection of behavioral techniques, the framework positions theological conviction as the foundation that shapes behavior, cognition, motivation, and spiritual formation.

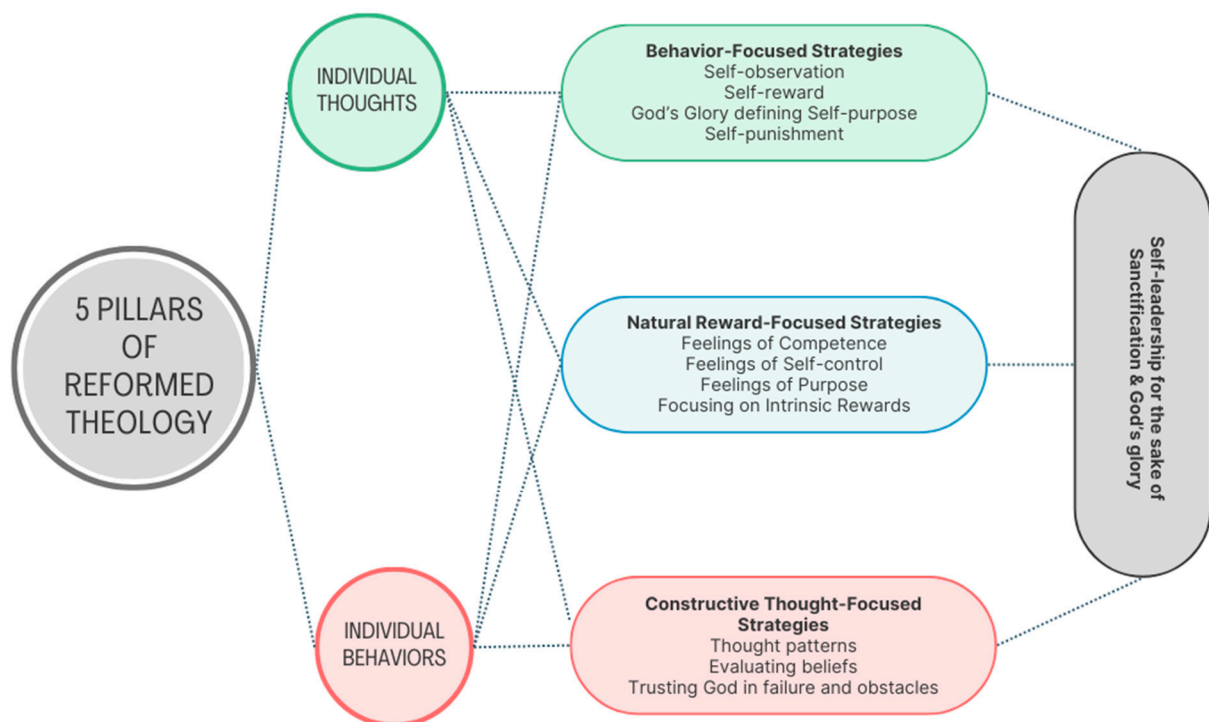


Figure 1. Spiritual Self-Leadership Framework.

The findings also carry important implications for Reformed Christian higher education during a period of significant leadership transition. As many institutions prepare for the retirement of senior administrators, succession planning should extend beyond technical qualifications to include the personal characteristics associated with mature self-leadership. Search committees, governing boards, and leadership development programs should intentionally evaluate behavioral discipline, intrinsic motivation, theological resilience, and the capacity to integrate professional excellence with spiritual maturity. These findings suggest that institutional sustainability depends not only on administrative competence but also on leaders whose theological convictions actively shape their leadership practices.

More broadly, this study contributes to the ongoing conversation regarding institutional identity within Christian higher education. Reformed institutions have historically maintained their distinctiveness through a shared theological vision passed from one generation of leaders to the next. The findings suggest that preserving this intergenerational memory requires leaders who can articulate and embody Reformed theology as a lived framework for leadership rather than merely a statement of institutional doctrine. In this way, theological fidelity becomes both a personal and organizational resource for resisting mission drift amid contemporary cultural, financial, and political pressures.

Future research should continue exploring the relationship between self-leadership, theological formation, and institutional leadership. One promising direction would be to examine the formative influence of mentors in cultivating spiritual self-leadership among senior administrators. Such work could investigate how experienced leaders transmit theological convictions, leadership habits, and organizational wisdom across generations, thereby strengthening the continuity of institutional identity. Longitudinal studies following emerging leaders throughout their careers would further illuminate how

self-leadership develops over time and how theological convictions continue to shape leadership practice across changing institutional contexts.

Ultimately, this study argues that effective leadership in Reformed Christian higher education requires more than administrative expertise. It requires leaders whose professional practices and spiritual formation are intentionally integrated. Reformed theological commitments function as cognitive and motivational mechanisms within self-leadership processes, but administrators often fail to transfer their professional self-regulation strategies into spiritual formation. The Spiritual Self-Leadership Framework provides a conceptual model for understanding that integration by demonstrating how Reformed theology can function as both the foundation and the sustaining force of self-leadership. As Christian higher education enters a new era of leadership transition and cultural complexity, such integration may prove essential not only for the flourishing of individual leaders but also for the long-term preservation of the mission and identity of Reformed institutions.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted according to the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by The University of West Florida Institutional Review Board (protocol code 2163955-3 and date of approval: 5 April 2024).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The original contributions presented in this study are included in the article. Further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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