FIRST AT THE TOP: NARRATIVES OF COLLEGE PRESIDENTS WHO WERE FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS

by

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(Under the Direction of Diane Cooper)

ABSTRACT

This narrative inquiry aimed to understand the experiences of college presidents who were first-generation students. Specifically, this study sought to identify the ways first-generation presidents transcended educational and career obstacles, explored their career pathways to the presidency, and recognized the ways first-generation college presidents approached leading institutions of higher education. Harper's (2010) anti-deficit achievement model grounded the study and served to center the research on persistence and resiliency.

By participating in narrative interviews, nine college presidents shared accounts of overcoming obstacles and navigating college presidencies. Each individual narrative is presented and analyzed for its own individual themes, followed by thematic analysis across the nine narratives. The distinct themes that emerged from the data included (1) mentors, (2) transcending educational and career obstacles, (3) presidential pathways, and (4) approach as first-generation presidents. Discussion and implications identify the ways the research supports dominant narratives, challenges those narratives, and writes a new narrative for college presidents who were first-generation college students. The research

supports that college presidents who come from a first-generation student background are uniquely prepared for the presidency and that they possess a skill-set and demeanor that sets them apart from their non-first-generation peers.

INDEX WORDS: College & University President, Narrative Inquiry, Counternarrative, First-Generation Student, Anti-Deficit Achievement Model, Resiliency

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my grandmother, Catherine Paquette. Grandma worked hard cooking in restaurants and nursing homes in my small hometown until the day she passed. Her pies and red velvet cake had a reputation of their own in my rural community, her hugs remedied the most challenging of days, and she was always the first person to celebrate the successes of her eight grandchildren. As a first-generation college student, I appreciated when she supported and celebrated my educational milestones and personal successes, yet she passed away during my final year of undergrad and was not able to see me obtain any of my degrees. When I was feeling anxious about pursuing a master's degree 500 miles from home, she reassured me that I should "go wherever I needed to go to better myself." It was her simple comment that gave me the permission I needed to pursue advanced degrees and set me down the path to a career in higher education. Her comment and permission allowed me to eventually pursue a PhD and for this dissertation to be reality. Working with grandma throughout high school and college at restaurants allowed me the opportunity to learn the value of hard work and resiliency, especially the 6AM-2PM shifts during summers and double shifts on weekends. I have used the skills she helped me learn throughout my life and without them I would not have become Dr. Paquette.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Nobody on the direct line of my mother or father's family even went to college, much less graduated. There is no doubt that my mother and father wanted me to be the person to break the cycle. I was going to college, and all their energies were directed toward my goal. I was to live a life of knowledge, culture, and wealth that they did not experience. One day when I was about seven, my mother took me to New York City to walk up and down 5th Avenue. My mother missed the city greatly. She had lived and worked there as a secretary right up until I was born, when she was 37. We were now living in a rural area outside Albany, and the adjustment was not easy for her. While walking down the street, she suddenly stopped and asked what was for me an almost unfathomable question: "See all these men and women walking on 5th Avenue? How can you spot the ones who are educated and highly successful?" I was just baffled. She said, "It's simple. Just look at their shoes. They are always shined. No scuffs. That's the difference. Always shine your shoes!" To this day, I have my shoes shined first thing when I arrive in New York City! I thought she would stop there, but that was not the case. "But remember, even if you shine your shoes, you are not them. You are different. You will never be comfortable in their highfaluting circles. Just remember that and you will be okay. Never lose sight of who you are and where you come from. Be successful—highly successful—but never take on their

> lifestyle. You don't have time for that luxury. Be your own self. Be independent and self-reliant. Be with them, but not of them." (Durden, 2013, p.7)

In this narrative, William G. Durden, president of Dickinson College between 1999 and 2013, identified a unique complexity of his identity as a first-generation student, scholar, and college president. Durden identified that, despite his career success, he has continually been reminded of the messages he received from those within his support structure. Many of the messages Durden received centered on not losing his working-class roots and that it was permissible for him to work among academics but that he should never fully acculturate and become one. Durden's account highlights one of many challenges that college presidents who were first-generation college students face in adjusting to college, overcoming educational barriers, and pursuing careers in academia. Like his peers, Durden's career required him to be adaptable and resilient to navigate the demands on him as a college president.

College Presidents

Seventy percent of college presidents are men and 83% of college presidents are White (Gagliardi, Espinosa, Turk, & Taylor, 2017). Between 1986 and 2016, the percentage of college presidents from minoritized racial and ethnic groups increased from 8% to 16%. In that same thirty-year period, women presidents increased from 9.5% to 30.1% (Gagliardi et al., 2017). College and university presidents rise to their roles from a variety of career paths, yet despite the varying routes to the presidency, the most common path continues to be rising through the ranks of the professorate (Cook, 2012). In 2016, 42.7% of college presidents had been chief academic officer, provost, or academic dean immediately prior to assuming a presidency—a percentage that has ranged from 40.8% to

44.7% from 2001 to 2016 (Gagliardi et al., 2017). Although the diversity of individuals assuming the presidency on college campuses remains limited, the role has become increasingly complex in the past decade (King & Gomez, 2008). College presidents must be decorated scholars, strong executives, adept at fundraising, willing to be a cheerleader and diplomat, and must excel at navigating politics. In addition to the multiple roles presidents must be able to fulfill, college presidents must demonstrate a unique combination of sophisticated skills and abilities including managing high-stakes conflict, regularly making complex decisions under stress, expecting and managing discord or crises, and having the flexibility and adaptability necessary to navigate a schedule that can vary significantly by the hour with little reprieve from responsibilities (Monks, 2012; Song & Hartley, 2012; Teker & Atan, 2013).

As the complexity of the role has increased, so has the pay for college presidents. In 2013, presidential salaries increased 5.7% at private universities and 7% at public universities from the year prior. The pay for presidents at private colleges averaged $436,429 in 2013 while presidents at public universities averaged $428,000. In 2013, 32 presidents at private colleges made over $1 million with the top paid president in the United States making $4,615, 230 (Cook, 2012; Harbin, 2016; Monks, 2016). Having experience as a college president has become increasingly attractive to search committees due to the complexity of the role and desire to hire a candidate with proven success in the role (Cook, 2012). In 2016, 26% of college presidents had held the same role at another institution prior to their current presidency (Gagliardi et al., 2017).

The majority of data on college presidents is made available through a national survey that occurs twice a decade in the United States (Cook, 2012). Demographic data

are collected and often reported from a single-identity perspective, leaving little understanding of intersections of identity for college presidents. Studies have sought to identify the nuances of marginalized or intersectional identities within the presidency (Klotz, 2013; Springer, 2014), but little research identifies the experiences and challenges of presidents who were first-generation college students. The twice-a-decade national survey does not identify presidents who were first-generation college students, leaving little way to identify this population or research their experiences. Because of the lack of data, no body of research exists to identify the ways in which the intersecting identities of college president and first-generation college student interact. Absent this data, no accounts, frameworks, or models of first-generation college presidents' resiliency exists. Although the population remains largely hidden, some college presidents who were first-generation students speak or write about their first-generation identity and the challenges and strengths it brings them in their roles. Michael Crow, President of Arizona State University, is one of the most vocal, regularly speaking and writing about overcoming barriers in his own experiences. He uses his own identity as a first-generation student to help students to do the same (Crow & Dabar, 2015). Additional stories of overcoming adversity as first-generation students to rise to the rank of college president remain untold but could be useful examples of resiliency, persistence, and developing confidence and competence both as a college student and as a university administrator.

First-Generation College Students

In addition to a lack of data on first-generation college presidents, there is no comprehensive data on first-generation college students attending all levels of higher education in the United States (Brown-Nagin, 2014). Despite a lack of comprehensive

data, researchers have attempted to capture data on this group since 1971, and in the United States 24-34% of college students identified as first-generation (Lightweis, 2014; Saenz, Hurtado, Barrerra, Wolf & Young, 2007; Stuber, 2011). Much of the research on first-generation college students operates from a deficit perspective, which identifies the ways this population does not perform as well as peers whose parents attended college (Brown-Nagin, 2014). Deficit research identifies how first-generation college students struggle to adapt to academic settings, manage family achievement guilt, and navigate educational systems that were not designed to support first-generation success (Brown-Nagin, 2014; D'Amico & Dika, 2013; Covarrubias, Romero, & Trivelli, 2014).

Continued inquiry into first-generation student experiences and their lack of success does little to explore the inherent skills and knowledge this population holds (Brown-Nagin, 2014). Recent research explores the ways in which specific populations use inherent intelligence and capital within their communities to build resiliency as students and academics (Espino, 2014). Harper (2010) suggested operating from an anti-deficit model and focusing on achievement and persistence. Strengths-based research not only provides a useful counter-narrative to demonstrate how a population succeeds despite extant literature citing their underperformance but lays the foundation for other counter-narratives from unique populations to emerge.

The Nature of the Study

Deficit research identifies areas where first-generation college students are not performing at the level of their non-first-generation counterparts but gives little direction for action, solutions, or best practices to support first-generation students. When considering the barriers for first-generation student success, it is an exceptional individual

whose skills, abilities, knowledge, personality, and intelligence allows them to not only persist in college but to excel as a university administrator and rise to the rank of college president. The specific challenges of the role of college president require a unique combination of sophisticated skills. Highlighting first-generation college presidents' narratives of how they built competence and confidence as students and administrators can provide useful data to identify themes and create a counter-narrative for success of students and university administrators.

This study sought to identify what factors contributed to the success of college presidents who were first-generation college students. By interviewing first-generation college presidents about their experiences, it was anticipated that themes would emerge about overcoming obstacles, career trajectory, and the distinct ways first-generation presidents approach their role. Harper's (2010) anti-deficit achievement framework served as the theoretical framework for this study and was adapted to understand college achievement and post-college persistence from a strength-based approach. Anti-deficit achievement framework is influenced by psychology, sociology, and education and explores the ways relationships, resiliency, support sources, skill-building, and environments can support success. The framework allowed for exploration of how building constructive responses to stereotypes supported success in addition to identifying mechanisms for building competence and confidence (Harper, 2010).

This study was organized around three research questions that focus on how college presidents who were first-generation college students made meaning of their own experiences.

Research Question 1

What compelled and enabled college presidents who were first-generation college students to transcend educational and career obstacles?

Research Question 2

What factors allowed college presidents who were first-generation college students to cultivate presidential aspirations and preparedness for the role?

Research Question 3

What is unique about the ways college presidents who were first-generation college students approach their roles as president?

Definition of Terms

First-generation college student. This term identified college students whose parents or primary caregivers did not attend or graduate from an institution of higher education (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Jehangir, 2010).

College president. This term identified the chief officer of a college or university, including two- and four-year institutions. In the United States, different state higher education systems interchange the term president and chancellor. For the purposes of this study, president referred to an individual who oversaw the individual institution and not a system-level administrator, despite the term used in a participant's state system.

Dominant & counter-narratives. Dominant or master narratives are accounts that justify the world as it currently is and do not disturb systems of privilege and power. Counter-narratives emphasize aspects of the world that have been silenced and oppose the privileged perspectives that dominate society, allowing for marginalized or minoritized voices to be heard (Aguirre, 2005; Delgado, 1995; Espino, 2012).

Minoritized. This term referred to individuals who are marginalized in society due to their subordinated identities. For example, women, Black individuals, and the queer community are minoritized identities. Consistent with critical approaches, this term was used to replace what is often referred to as minority in literature. The term minority does not identify the ways in which systems work to place individuals in a minoritized position. In addition, minority suggests a numerical relationship without recognizing that despite the size of a population, power within society is held by privileged identities (Harper, 2012).

Assumptions and Limitations

This research was approached accepting certain assumptions and drawing attention to specific limitations inherent in studying college presidents who were first-generation students.

Political nature of the college presidency. The work of a college president is political in nature and includes many competing priorities (Cook, 2012). In today's political landscape, this can be particularly challenging for presidents who work within complex state higher educational systems. This study included participants at private and public institutions of varying institutional type. In addition, criteria included presidents who left their roles for careers outside of an institution within the past five years or who retired in the last five years. Including participation from former presidents was done to allow for reflection on experiences with less political pressure or concerns.

Access to pool of participants. No data exists on college presidents who were first-generation college students. The researcher relied on publicly available information including news articles and online president profiles to identify individual presidents who

were first-generation college students. This approach yielded over 70 college presidents who fit the criteria for the study and is detailed fully in Chapter 3. The researcher had over a decade of experience as a higher education administrator. The researcher's background, contacts, and experience were useful to identify personal contacts who fit the criteria.

Socio-economic status. Many participants grew up in a lower socio-economic status or identified as working-class. Although social class was articulated in the participants' narratives—it was uniquely challenging to extrapolate from first-generation identity—it was first-generation identity, not socio-economic status, that served as the focus of this study.

Significance and Rationale

The college presidency requires a unique and multifaceted individual who must wear multiple hats and juggle multiple roles while having the skills to have great influence on a campus (Cook, 2012). Gaining an understanding of the ways in which individual college presidents have used their inherent skills and resiliency to overcome challenges can identify patterns of success and generate implications for higher education administrators who aspire to the college presidency, specifically professionals who were first-generation college students. In addition, this study served to further highlight the need to systematically identify and/or study first-generation college presidents, because these individuals' perseverance and skill sets have distinct value in higher education. Further rationale for this study included identifying ways that first-generation college presidents are uniquely prepared to recognize and mitigate barriers to access and success

of first-generation students on their campuses and the distinct ways first-generation presidents approach the presidency.

The deficit perspective that pervades the research on first-generation students identifies the unique shortcomings and needs of first-generation students but fails to identify the strengths or successes of first-generation college students (Brown-Nagin, 2014; Espino, 2012; Harper, 2010). In addition, the dominant narrative of college presidents suggests that they come from histories of privilege that make them comfortable in academic settings (Durden, 2013). These dominant narratives perpetuate an inaccurate narrative that individuals with privilege and academic pedigrees can become college presidents and that, absent those traits, a presidency is unattainable.

This study sought to challenge the dominant narratives of college presidents and first-generation students by exploring the intersection of those identities. Exploring this intersection adds to the body of research by identifying inherent strengths of this population. More specifically, it identified individual narratives of college presidents and how they navigated unfamiliar academic environments as first-generation students, overcame obstacles, and led a college or university in ways that supported or challenged Durden's perspective of consistently being an outsider in the academy.

Chapter Summary

Chapter 1 introduced the study of college presidents who were first-generation students. The study sought to answer the three research questions outlined previously that highlight the ways in which first-generation college presidents succeeded by overcoming barriers and the unique ways they approach the role of president. The study is grounded in anti-deficit achievement framework, which allowed the research to center data

collection and analysis on the inherent strengths of participants. Chapter 2 further details the central phenomenon of the study and introduces the key components of the anti-deficit achievement framework.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

> And the worst of it is that we actively cultivate this disorientation among our own students. We hold in our heart the uncomfortable truth that we're leading our own students down that same path of cultural alienation, bringing them individual freedom while simultaneously interfering in their familial and community allegiances. We recognize more fully than most that college *can* change your life—and in ways that cannot be predicted sufficiently to decide whether that's going to be a good idea. We love what college has done for us—*to* us—but we can never wholeheartedly cheerlead for higher education, because we know what those gains have cost. (Childress, 2016, final para)

In this excerpt, Childress identified an inherent challenge for first-generation academics and university administrators—that education opens doors but it also complicates family and community connections for many first-generation students. This challenge is one of many identified in the literature reviewed in this chapter. Chapter 2 provides a review of extant literature on both college presidents and first-generation college students. The chapter concludes with a detailed outline of the anti-deficit achievement framework that grounded this study.

College Presidents

The challenges that face college and university presidents today are increasingly complex and require significant executive-level skills and abilities. The challenges of the

role have impacted the length of time presidents serve in their roles. The average college president serves 6.5 years in the role as of the time of this study, down from 7 years in 2011 (Gagliardi et al., 2017). Presidents at public universities serve an average of six years and have a 50% higher chance of leaving their positions within five years than their peers at private universities who serve an average of seven years (Gagliardi et al., 2017; Monks, 2012). College presidents at all institutional types must be able to manage numerous conflicting priorities and navigate between several roles throughout their schedules that often require 12 or more hours of service a day, six to seven days a week. Whether they preside over a liberal arts college, a large research institution, a community college, a comprehensive teaching college, or a historically Black college or university (HBCU), presidents must be omnipresent on campus, willing to make difficult decisions under pressure, able to keep their boards engaged at an appropriate level, and remain politically savvy (Rabovsky & Rutherford, 2016). Just as the challenges of the presidency have become increasingly complex and demanding, the remuneration for the position has increased substantially. The pay for presidents at private colleges averaged $436,429 in 2013, an increase of 5.7% from the year prior, while presidents at public universities averaged $428,000, an increase of 7% from the year prior. In 2013, 32 presidents at private colleges made over $1 million, with the top-paid college president in the United States making $4,615, 230 (Cook, 2012; Monks, 2012; Harbin, 2016). To be considered for the high-paying role, president candidates must demonstrate success in politics, scholarship, fundraising, and executive leadership (Rabovsky & Rutherford, 2016; Teker & Atan, 2014).

Academic

The most common path to the college presidency has remained consistent since the American Council on Education (ACE) began tracking such data in 1986. ACE maintains the most comprehensive pool of data on college presidents. Their data demonstrate the most common role prior to becoming president is chief academic officer, provost, or academic dean. Forty-two percent of presidents served in one of these roles immediately prior to assuming a presidency, and 26% served as president at another institution immediately prior (Gagliardi et al., 2017). At baccalaureate colleges that percentage increases—nearly one-third served as president at another institution prior to being selected as president (Gagliardi et al., 2017). Since 1986, 70–75% of college presidents were formerly full-time faculty (Cook, 2012) and in 2016 that percentage increased to 81% (Gagliardi et al., 2017). With the increasing complexity of the presidency, however, many provosts have moved away from their traditional roles of leading the educational experience for a college or university to a more inward focus on accreditation, compliance, and retention (EAB, 2017). Due to the narrowing of the scope of the provost role and its internal focus, many long-term provosts have become less attractive as presidential candidates, and deans of high-functioning colleges within a university who have worked with external constituents and have overseen fundraising and complex communication have an increasingly attractive set of skills for the presidency (EAB, 2017).

Although meeting the needs of many stakeholders is required of presidents, winning the trust and respect of faculty is a key tenet to the success of a college president. Presidents who are unable to earn the respect of faculty have a difficult path ahead of

them (Legon, Lombardi, & Rhoades, 2013). Teker and Atan (2013) identified the importance of being distinguished as a scholar before pursing administrative roles at a university. All other stakeholders in institutions come and go, including students, administrators, and external politicians and influencers. However, faculty remain constant and are often on campus longer than all other actors (Legon et al., 2013). In addition, faculty see the key role of a university as creating and disseminating knowledge and educating the future workforce and leaders within society, which informs the high value they place on hiring decorated scholars as presidents (Teker & Atan, 2013). Presidents rise to their position from a variety of disciplines, yet the most common discipline is education. Twenty-nine percent of presidents come from the discipline of education. That percentage increases significantly at two-year institutions, where 68% of college presidents came from the discipline of education.

Executive

College presidents must be able to strategize, make difficult decisions, manage conflicting priorities, and be accessible around the clock. In addition, they must be able to create detailed and nuanced policies and plans that are often approved via shared-governance, an operating strategy uncommon outside of the U.S. higher education system (Rabovsky & Rutherford, 2016). The result is little autonomy to make decisions unilaterally, requiring a president adept at consensus-building (Teker & Atan, 2013). Unlike an executive in business or industry, a university executive must recognize that very few decisions they make happen in isolation. University presidents have numerous stakeholders who are often very engaged in and impacted by institution-wide decisions (Rabovsky & Rutherford, 2016). Although presidents of colleges and universities may

not have the same expectations that a CEO in industry may, there are many applicable business skills and mindsets for running a university. These include strategic planning, entrepreneurial approaches to success, transparent decision-making, action-based orientation, and fiscal responsibility (Merten, 2012).

Presidents cite budget and financial management as consuming the largest portion of their time and resulting in the highest portion of stress in the position (Cook, 2012; Gardner, 2016). Sixty-one percent of college presidents stated that money was their top challenge (Gagliardi et al., 2017). As executives, college presidents must build, manage, and be good stewards of institutional finances while planning strategically for the fiscal longevity of institutions (Rabovsky & Rutherford, 2016). For many who have risen through academic ranks, managing a budget may not be a new challenge. The nuances of managing university-wide revenues and expenditures, however, is a rare skill for new presidents, and it is one that must be mastered quickly (Gardner, 2016).

Fundraiser, Cheerleader, and Diplomat

Not only must presidents manage finances to succeed in their roles, but they must demonstrate success in raising funds for the institution (Gardner, 2016). In an age of decreasing and uncertain financial resources, fundraising has become increasingly important for presidents. To raise funds effectively, presidents must be able to build connections and partnerships with individuals in the private sector, notable and successful alumni, and corporations. They must build these key relationships while maintaining strong connections and presence among on-campus constituents (Teker & Atan, 2014). A strong presence on campus supports faculty, staff, and students in feeling good about their choice of place to work, learn, and develop (Gardner, 2012).

Today's level of institutional pressure results in new presidents having very little time to learn on the job. To be successful in the role, presidents must be willing to jump in right away and get to know the campus they run (Teker & Atan, 2014). To achieve this, presidents must attend social events and interact both formally and informally with faculty, students, and staff as well as learn about the values of the institution from its members (Gardner, 2016). Gaining on-campus trust allows presidents to garner support for their ideas and be seen as personally invested in the success of the institution (Legon et al., 2013).

Politician

In addition to being a top academic, strong executive, and adept fundraiser, college and university presidents must be politically savvy to succeed in their roles (Rabovsky & Rutherford, 2016). Serving on non-profit boards often helps presidents gain experience in political settings and in community-based decision-making (Song & Hartley, 2012). Serving on boards elevates presidents' influence and their ability to interact with community partners, which gains the institution a higher profile (Song & Hartley, 2012). The current political climate of higher education is increasingly hostile, particularly for many public colleges and universities in conservative states. Because of this, presidents of colleges and universities must overcome polarization and partisan conflicts to advance their institutions (Rabovsky & Rutherford, 2016). For example, at the University of Tennessee in 2016, state lawmakers defunded the campus diversity office due to concerns over the office suggesting the use of inclusive gender pronouns, which the president supported (Brown, 2016). Within a year, the president at the University of Tennessee resigned from his position. Today's presidents should be

prepared for high involvement on their campuses when incidents of this nature erupt unexpectedly and to make savvy collective decisions with their integrity intact (Rabovsky & Rutherford, 2016).

To manage today's difficult political terrain, among other reasons, some colleges and universities have hired former politicians to serve as presidents. Hiring former politicians as presidents often results in high levels of public interest (Seltzer, 2016). The political skills former politicians bring can be very beneficial to institutions, including networks of elected officials and the ability to navigate or circumvent political barriers traditional presidents may face (Seltzer, 2016). Although the political skills can benefit institutions, hiring a politician also comes with its own challenges. The can include an often-rough adjustment to faculty governance and managing the challenges of academic environments. Specifically, former politicians who have a strong conservative history often struggle with students' expression as well as academic freedom (Seltzer, 2016). This was the case at Kennesaw State University where the state's attorney general, Sam Olens, was appointed president despite faculty and student protests in 2016. Unable to manage campus protests and without the internal support or capital to lead the institution, he resigned within a year (Roll, 2017). Despite Olen's lack of success in the role and short tenure, some politicians have exceled in their roles of college president.

Skills for College Presidents

In addition to their often conflicting and challenging roles, successful college presidents generally demonstrate a bevy of skills and abilities. The role of college president requires acumen to deal with uncertainty, irregularity, unpredictability, and impermanence (Legon et al., 2013; Gardner, 2016; Merten, 2012). Presidents must be

able to negotiate internally and externally in times of conflict, regularly persuade others, and navigate numerous environments daily (Teker & Atan, 2013). Presidents should be prepared to deal with frustration and can expect it to occur regularly (Merten, 2012). Successful presidents are often emotionally resilient and unmoved by the multitude of varying pressures they face daily (Teker & Atan, 2014). Skills for presidents should also include being agile and taking advantage of opportunities to advance the institution whenever possible. Planning alone does not always result in success, but seizing opportunity when it presents itself can lead to successful outcomes for presidents (Merten, 2012).

In addition to the skills necessary for the role, college presidents are often expected to deliver results forthwith. Today's college presidents no longer have a long timeframe for learning their community and they must thrive quickly (Gardner, 2016). Absent a strong foundation of integrity, presidents can be easily swayed under this pressure (Teker & Atan, 2014). With the short duration of the role, college presidents have a brief window for instituting change, which requires them to be quick on their feet, data-driven yet agile (Rabovsky & Rutherford, 2016). The ability to be emotionally resilient cannot be overstated for college and university presidents. The role can be very lonely, and on their campuses, presidents have no peers. It is incumbent on college presidents to create networks with other college and university presidents to overcome their campus challenges and to manage the personal impact of the role (Merten, 2012; Seltzer, 2016).

Demographics of Today's College Presidents

Every five years since 1986, ACE surveys university and college presidents and produces a comprehensive report on the demographics of college and university presidents (Cook, 2012; Gagliardi et al., 2017; King & Gomez, 2012). The results of the most recent survey demonstrate that although the roles of and skill set required for college presidents have changed, the demographics have seen little shift. Seventy percent of college presidents are men and 83% of college presidents are White (Gagliardi et al., 2017). In the past decade women presidents have steadily increased from 23% to 30.1%, and in that same time frame individuals from minoritized backgrounds have gone from 13.6% in 2006, down to 12.6% in 2011, and up again to 16.8% in 2016 (Gagliardi et al., 2017; King & Gomez, 2012).

Although the demographics of students at colleges and universities have changed significantly since 1986, presidents' demographics have not changed at a similar rate (Cook, 2012). In addition, the pipeline to the presidency shows little diversity. Only 16% of all senior administrators on college campuses are people of color and less than 10% of chief academic officers are minoritized by race or ethnicity (King & Gomez, 2008). The lack of diversity in the role of president and among senior administrators emphasizes the need to diversify the pipeline to presidency. Due to the increasing complexity of the position and seeking a guarantee of success, many colleges and universities have opted to hire sitting presidents with a proven record of accomplishments. Twenty-six percent of presidential hires in 2016 consisted of hiring a current president (Cook, 2012; Gagliardi et al., 2017). In addition, the average age of college presidents continues to rise. In 2016

the average president was 62 years old, up from 60 a decade earlier (Gagliardi et al., 2017).

First-Generation College Students

There is no comprehensive data within higher education that identifies how many students are first-generation at colleges and universities (Brown-Nagin, 2014). Due to this, scholars and practitioners must rely on self-report from institutions and students, recognizing that each institution may have different definitions of first-generation and collect data on their students in different formats. In absence of a national definition and database, and in partnership with the Foundation for Independent Higher Education, the University of California–Los Angeles's Higher Education Research Institute has collected comprehensive data on first-generation college students since 1971 (Saenz et al., 2007).

Demographics of First-Generation College Students

The number of first-generation college students in higher education institutions within the United States is unknown, yet many researchers have attempted to document the number using differing metrics. Saenz et al.'s (2007) most recent report did not address two-year colleges but identified that since 1971 the number of first-generation college students in the aggregate has steadily declined from 38.5% to 15.9% at four-year colleges and universities, suggesting increasing levels of education within the United States. Engel and Tinto (2008) documented that across all of higher education, 24% of students were first-generation college students. Lightweis (2014) and Stuber (2011) identified that as high as 34% of first-year students at colleges and universities across the United States are first-generation. The racial demographics of first-generation students

are estimated at 38% Latino, 22.6% African American, 16.8% Native American, 19% Asian, and 13.2% White (Brown-Nagin, 2014; Saenz et al., 2007). Immigrants are highly represented among the population of first-generation students (Brown-Nagin, 2014; Saenz et al., 2007).

Early research on first-generation college students identified parents and family as a potential barrier to first-generation student success (Terezini et al, 1996). This narrative has been complicated in recent research because first-generation students have begun to identify parents as a source of support and encouragement to attend college. The number of students who view their parents as a source of support has doubled since 1971 (Saenz et al., 2007). Despite family encouragement to attend college, familial financial support continues to be a challenge for this population. Fifty-five percent of first-generation students work through college to fund their education. Working throughout college detracts from their success and puts first-generation students at a higher risk of not graduating from college (Brown-Nagin, 2014; Saenz et al, 2007).

Financial aid packages and the ability to make more money after college are key factors for first-generation college students when deciding which school to attend (Saenz et al., 2007). Many first-generation students' choice of college is based on recommendations from their high school counselors and relatives, and most chose colleges within 50 miles of their family's home. First-generation students are more likely than their non-first-generation peers to live off-campus to save costs, a decision that puts them at higher risk for attrition. Non-first-generation students, by contrast, commonly make higher education decisions based on institutional ranking (Saenz et al., 2007).

Academic Preparedness

First-generation college students are underprepared for the rigors of collegiate academics (Brown-Nagin, 2014; Engel & Tinto, 2008; Lightweis, 2014; Pascarella et al., 2004; Saenz et al., 2007). From a critical perspective, one might alternately argue that colleges and universities are underprepared to meet the needs of first-generation college students (Stuber, 2011). First-generation college students are four times more likely to leave college after one year, at a rate of 26% compared to 7% for non-first-generation college students (Lightweis, 2014). In addition, within six years of matriculating at a college or university, 38% to 43% of first-generation college students have not obtained a degree and have withdrawn from college. The 5 percent difference varies based on income level. Comparatively, for students' whose parents received college degrees and were not low-income, only 20% do not finish degrees within six years (Engle & Tinto, 2008).

Additional Factors Impacting First-Generation Students

The demographics and academic preparedness of first-generation college students differ from their non-first-generation peers. Additional factors that impact first-generation college students include culturally adapting to academic settings, the impact of guilt from families, and education systems that fail to meet their needs as individuals and families who are new to institutions of higher education.

Cultural adaptation. First-generation college students who leave behind their family and friends often struggle to adapt to higher education norms, culture, and expectations (D'Amico & Dika, 2013). Cultural adaptation includes learning the norms of faculty expectations, understanding scholarly behavior, and learning as a priority

above measurable hard work. For first-generation students of color this challenge is exacerbated when attending Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) where racial isolation impacts adjustment (D'Amico & Dika, 2013). Cultural adaption becomes increasingly challenging as students begin to adjust to the collegiate environment and may no longer fully fit in their communities of origin (Collier & Morgan, 2008; D'Amico & Dika, 2013).

Family achievement guilt. First-generation college students often face guilt over their pursuit of higher education (Covarrubias et al., 2014). Many first-generation students articulate that despite creating a greater future for themselves, they recognize that by attending college they are often also abandoning their families. For those who come from backgrounds with alcoholism, marital conflict, or premature family deaths, this can often lead to a feeling of survivor guilt because they have left the difficult circumstances of their families while others are left behind to struggle (Covarrubias et al., 2014; Piorkowski, 1983). Because of the guilt associated with higher achievement, many first-generation students minimize their academic achievements. Specifically, they often minimize in front of family members who have not had access to higher education. This guilt can lead to higher levels of depressive symptoms and lower self-esteem (Covarrubias et al, 2014).

Education systems and first-generation students. Education, and specifically higher education in the United States, is portrayed as the great equalizer that allows individuals, no matter their class or history, access to a better life (Brown-Nagin, 2014). The reality, however, is that educational systems in the United States do little to support working-class or first-generation students. Colleges and universities are organized to

support middle- and upper-class norms and rules, which often results in disadvantaging first-generation college students (Stephens et al, 2012). Without parents who have gone to college, first-generation students, especially those from working-class backgrounds, often struggle navigating the academic process despite their high levels of academic achievement (Brown-Nagin, 2014). Because of this, many first-generation college students underestimate their ability to attend top institutions. Fifty-three percent of high-achieving, low-income students do not apply for universities that match the academic rigor that standardized tests identify suit them (Brown-Nagin, 2014).

First-generation college students' additional barriers and lower levels of success than their non-first-generation peers are well documented (Brown-Nagin, 2014; Engel & Tinto, 2008; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Pascarella et al, 2004; Springer, 2014; Saenz et al., 2007). The documented challenges suggest that supplemental support in college may mediate these obstacles, which may well lead to success. However, the systems that continue to create first-generation students who are performing at levels lower than their peers must also be recognized and held to account in research. Lack of access to college-prep or college-level coursework in high school, the fact that standardized test scores correlate with family income, and slowly changing systems of education in the United States continue to yield underperformance (Brown-Nagin, 2014). Brown-Nagin (2014) argued that colleges and universities can best achieve the goals of higher education and serve students by altering the metrics by which they offer support and assistance. College presidents who were first-generation students demonstrate that first-generation students can overcome these obstacles and provide a counter-narrative for success. First-generation college presidents succeeded not only as first-generation

undergraduate students but succeeded in obtaining graduate degrees, which relies on academic socialization in graduate school and mentoring relationships between faculty and doctoral students (Espino, 2014).

Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework

Quantitative data demonstrate patterns of lower success for first-generation college students but fail to articulate the nuances of the lived experiences of first-generation college students (Stuber, 2011). Although first-generation college students are at higher risk for attrition, the majority persist due to resiliency and are often able to channel their challenges into motivation that allows them to overcome obstacles. Oftentimes the subset of first-generation students who have the skills to channel their motivations become leaders on campus (Stuber, 2011). Harper's (2010) anti-deficit achievement framework, which was designed to study support systems for Black men in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) fields, allows research on persistence in the face of adversity to operate from a strengths-based perspective. Harper's model identifies sources of support and success that can create data to counter the master narrative for marginalized populations. Specifically, the anti-deficit achievement framework does not focus on the lack of resources, social and cultural capital, or pre-college educational privilege. Instead, it allows the research to focus on the ways in which participants acquired multiple forms of capital that they did not have prior to starting college and that support their success (Harper, 2010).

Categories and Dimensions of Harper's Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework

Harper's (2010) anti-deficit achievement framework served as the theoretical basis for this study and focuses on three distinct categories of educational and career

achievement including pre-college socialization and readiness, college achievement, and post-college persistence. Within these three categories are nine distinct dimensions of achievement, three that correspond with each category. The first category is pre-college socialization and readiness. It includes the dimensions of familial factors, K-12 school forces, and out-of-school college prep experiences. The second category is college achievement and it includes the dimensions of classroom interactions, out-of-class engagement, and experiential/external opportunities. The third category is post-college persistence in STEM and it includes the dimensions of industry careers, graduate school enrollment, and research careers (see Figure 1).

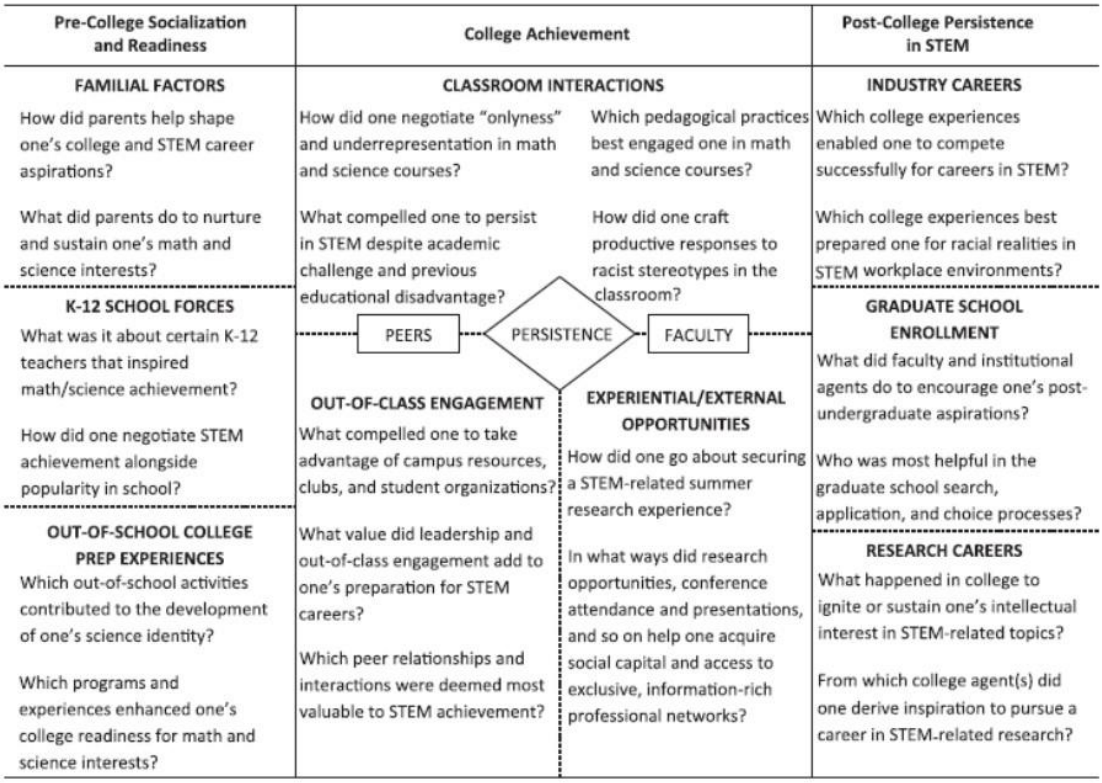

Figure 1. Harper's Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework

The first category, pre-college socialization and readiness, informed this study but was not a key focus of interview protocol or data analysis. The second and third categories, college achievement and post-college persistence, informed the research questions for this study as well as the interview protocol. The second and third categories also informed the data analysis. These two categories were given priority over pre-college socialization and readiness because the focus of this research was less about what led the participants to college and instead about the college experience itself, terminal degree-attainment, and career progression for college presidents who were first-generation college students.

Theoretical Influences of Harper's Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework

Harper's (2010) anti-deficit achievement framework is informed by eight distinct theories within the fields of psychology, sociology, and education. Each identifies ways in which individuals can achieve success and overcome obstacles. Those eight areas include cultural and social capital theories, stereotype threat theory, attribution theory, campus ecology theories, self-efficacy theory, critical race theory, student retention theories, and possible selves theories. Each is detailed below with a description of how it applied to studying college presidents who were first-generation students.

Cultural and social capital theories. Bordieu's (1986, 1987) cultural capital and social capital theories identified ways in which capital, or the ability to influence, impacts individuals. From Harper's (2010) anti-deficit achievement perspective when studying college presidents who were first-generation college students, this theoretical influence allowed for identification of valuable relationships with individuals who hold appropriate social capital to connect students with individuals who can assist them in their academic

achievement and connection within their field of study. Such connections fostered students' own capital and subsequently their success.

Stereotype threat theory. Steele (1997) and Steele and Arnson's (1995) stereotype threat theory focused on the ways that racist stereotypes have negative effects on minoritized students' performance. From Harper's (2010) anti-deficit achievement perspective, inquiry into stereotype threat identified ways in which individuals resist internalizing self-expectations based on their identities to succeed and achieve. First-generation college students, particularly those who became presidents, faced stereotype threat at differing levels based on their intersection of identities. For example, a White participant who attended college with many other White first-generation college students likely faced less stereotype threat than a Black man who attended a rural liberal arts college with few Black students.

Attribution theory. Weiner's (1985) attribution theory allowed for identification of individuals, resources, events, and activities that helped individuals succeed. Harper's (2010) anti-deficit achievement framework approach to attribution theory assisted in exploring specific individual or experiences that helped college presidents who were first-generation students achieve.

Campus ecology theories. Moos (1986) and Strange and Banning (2001) highlighted the ways campus environments impact student success or failure. From Harper's (2010) anti-deficit achievement perspective, it allowed for exploration of how individuals thrive by negotiating challenging, complex, and foreign systems of academia.

Self-efficacy theory. Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy theory focused on one's belief in their ability to succeed. From Harper's (2010) anti-deficit achievement

perspective when focusing on college presidents who were first-generation students, this theoretical influence allowed for exploration of how confidence and competence were developed to support achievement in education and career success.

Critical race theory. Harper (2009), Solorzano and Yosso (2002), and Yosso (2005) identified critical race theory as a way for people of color to see themselves as empowered to counter the master narrative regarding success of marginalized populations. Critical race theory's influence on Harper's (2010) anti-deficit achievement framework allowed this framework to be a tool for college presidents from minoritized backgrounds who were first-generation students to explore the ways their intersecting identities were a source of empowerment.

College student retention theories. Swail, Redd, and Perna (2003) and Tinto (1993) identified factors that help colleges retain some students while others fall victim to attrition. From Harper's (2010) anti-deficit achievement framework perspective, retention theories assisted to identify ways that college presidents who were first-generation students continued enrollment and persistence toward degrees despite obstacles.

Possible selves theories. Markus and Nurius (1986) and Oyserman, Grant, and Ager (1995)'s possible selves theories identified experiences that allow individuals to see or not see themselves in specific long-term careers. From Harper's (2010) anti-deficit achievement perspective, this theoretical influence allowed for identifying ways that college presidents who were first-generation students developed skills to see themselves as successful scholars, university administrators, and college presidents.

The eight theoretical influences on Harper's (2010) anti-deficit achievement framework combine to create a comprehensive approach to studying college presidents

who were first-generation students. These influences allowed for unique exploration of how individuals created skills, resiliency, and the abilities necessary to succeed despite obstacles in their progression to becoming college presidents.

Chapter Summary

Chapter 2 outlined the role of college and university presidents today including the challenges of managing multiple priorities as well as identifying the skills that supported success of college presidents. Chapter 2 then reviewed current demographics of first-generation college students to identify ways in which deficit research illuminates the challenges for first-generation students but does little to identify pathways to success. The chapter concludes by introducing Harper's (2010) anti-deficit achievement framework, which served as the theoretical basis for this study of college presidents who were first-generation college students. Chapter 3 will provide a detailed introduction to the methods and approach for this study.

CHAPTER 3

METHODS

> But as with any immigrant community, naturalized scholars are never quite welcome in their new homeland, either. We study the habits, master the vocabulary, serve on yet another committee. We make sure that our work is immaculate, beyond every expectation. Anything less leaves us exposed and endangered. We take nothing for granted; we always think our cover will be blown, our ruse revealed, our passport revoked. My first-generation colleagues tell me that they can never allow themselves to be seen as 'that farm girl,' the former truck driver or warehouseman, pretending to be scholars like little children wearing their parents' shoes. We master the camouflage that keeps us hidden and safe. We smooth out our jarring regional accents, stop telling jokes, take up skiing rather than snowmobiling. We are double agents. (Childress, 2016, thirteenth para.)

In his vivid description, Childress (2016) identified the transition process of assuming a new identity as first-generation in the academy. His account is not unique, and it resonates with my positionality as a first-generation college student now working in college administration, which is detailed in this chapter. This chapter builds on the central phenomenon and theoretical framework outlined in the previous chapter by identifying the researcher's approach to the study. The chapter includes the researcher's positionality within the study and details the methods and procedures for the study. The

chapter concludes with outlining the ways in which data were collected and analyzed and steps that were taken to ensure the trustworthiness of the study data and results.

Epistemological Stance

An epistemological stance provides a framework for the ways in which the researcher makes meaning and interprets the nature of knowledge and truth (Johnson & Parry, 2015). The researcher identifies his own framework as a critical constructivist epistemology. Consistent with a constructivist epistemology, the researcher recognizes knowledge as something that is created rather than discovered and that knowledge is unlimited. This epistemological stance is informed by an ontological perspective that multiple truths coexist and can, at times, be in conflict. An ontological orientation identifies how the researcher makes sense of reality. More specifically, it describes how the researcher and participants will understand multiple truths (Hays & Singh, 2012; Ponterotto, 2005). Layering a critical lens over this allows the researcher to understand, interpret, and interrogate knowledge within a power and privilege framework (Espino, 2012). Consistent with critical approaches, data collected and knowledge created can not only contribute to knowledge, but be used to implement new programs rooted in equity for both first-generation college students and aspiring college presidents. Using the data in that way can support first-generation populations in overcoming obstacles and contribute to the mission and goals of social justice and engaging critical research (Lyons et al., 2013).

Based on the researcher's framework and the questions being studied, a qualitative method for research best aligned with the goals and needs of the study. The

narrative methodology allowed college presidents to share narratives that counter deficit approaches that pervade research on first-generation college students.

Qualitative Research

The purpose of qualitative research is to identify and make meaning of individuals' collective stories and experiences (Creswell, 2014). Whereas quantitative research identifies patterns of large-picture phenomena, qualitative research seeks not just to identify what the phenomenon is but allows for exploration of potential factors contributing to phenomena. Qualitative research explores not just what is happening but why it is occurring. Qualitative approaches conceptualize meaning as something that is constructed by individuals within their contexts, interactions, and environments. Just as reality can shift throughout time, meanings and meaning-making can shift over time (Lyons et al., 2013). In addition, qualitative research accepts subjectivity as a primary tenet because it allows for individual stories.

Qualitative research is used across disciplines but is common in social sciences and educational research due to its ability to identify specific stories (Hays & Singh, 2012). The use of qualitative methods in education and counseling research is vital to understanding how power, privilege, oppression, and social justice impact education systems. Qualitative inquiry allows the researcher to share a view that the world can change and that change can be from anywhere within systems (Johnson & Parry, 2015). Relationships are a vital part of education, social justice, and career success. Qualitative research is rooted in relationships both with the participants and the topic of the study. Relationships provide the foundation for human potential to be actualized (Hays & Singh, 2012).

Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry operates from a historical or story-telling perspective whereby participants communicate their sense of their worlds through stories that are interpreted by the researcher (Clandinin, 2016; Hays & Singh, 2012). Changing stories from a singular dominant narrative such as believing that all college presidents come from backgrounds of wealth and privilege to understanding that college presidents come from myriad backgrounds can occur within narrative inquiry. It allows for explorations of people's holistic experience with understanding social, cultural, familial, linguistic, and institutional aspects of narratives that shape individual's identity (Clandinin, 2016). Illuminating narratives as data from participants reveals cultural and political details in individual stories that have the potential to apply to a larger context. The researcher seeks to piece together the participants' narrative (Clandinin, 2016). Hays and Singh (2012) identified three key components and assumptions of narrative inquiry that include speaking in narrative format to connect events over time via story-telling, believing that identities are shaped by the stories individuals share with others, and recognizing that narratives change depending on context. Consistent with the researcher's narrative theoretical orientation as a counselor, as a narrative researcher, the researcher searches for dominant plot lines, opportunities to re-write one's own story, story linkages, and breaks in sequence. In addition, the affect and demeanor in which the story is told may be equally as important as the content of the story itself (Denborough, 2014; Hays & Singh, 2012). Consistent with both narrative therapy and narrative research methods, accounting for systems of power and privilege and viewing the participant as someone both engaging

in and affected by those systems are essential to effective narrative approaches (Denborough, 2014).

Procedure

Individual narrative interviews were used to understand what contributed to the educational success and career trajectory of college presidents who were first-generation students. Narrative interviews allowed for exploration of how participants' social identities impacted their career path and how they have made meaning of their experiences. Nine first-generation college students who went on to be college presidents were identified and interviewed consistent with the narrative approaches outlined above.

Participant Sample

Participants were selected for this study based on criterion sampling. When using criterion sampling, the researcher identified individuals who fit the specific criteria for the study (Hays & Singh, 2012). Criteria included being college presidents who were first-generation college students, which also included participants who had left their role as president within the past five years. Despite including potential participants who had left their role in the last five years, all participants in the study were current presidents. Because information on potential participants was not readily available from a singular source, snowball sampling was also used. Snowball sampling allowed for participants to identify additional potential participants who met the criteria (Hays & Singh, 2012). Snowball sampling is particularly useful with hard-to-access populations. In addition to criterion and snowball sampling approaches, the researcher sought to obtain participants who serve as presidents at institutions of varying institutional type and who hold varying

social identities. Having a range in institution type and identities allowed for varying narratives and richness in data.

To ensure variation in the sample based on institutional type, geographic location, and participants' identities, potential participants were invited in increments of three to five at a time, allowing them to respond before the researcher invited additional potential participants. A spreadsheet of 76 potential participants was created to assist in recruitment. To create the list of potential participants, an extensive Google search of key words including president, college president, university president, chancellor, first-generation, first-gen, and related terms was used. This process included convenience sampling techniques, allowing the researcher to have access to a population without additional hurdles or excessive travel, which could have increased the cost of the research and delayed its results (Schwandt, 2001). This process allowed the researcher to find clusters of participants at colleges and universities near one another so as to be able to conduct all interviews in person. In addition, in specific geographic areas where the researcher lived or was traveling, more targeted searches were conducted by identifying the names of specific college presidents in that location and searching their names to determine if they might fit the criteria. From the list of 76 potential participants, 22 were contacted via e-mail. After a week, if no response was received, another e-mail was sent to follow up. If no response occurred after the second e-mail, no further action was taken. Of the 22 invited to participate, four declined participation, eight did not respond, and ten accepted the invitation to participate. One was unable to do so due to scheduling, yielding nine participants. Participants spanned institutional types including public, private, two-year, and four-year institutions.

Participation Criteria. Criteria for participation in this study included being a first-generation college student and currently serving or having served as a college president within the past five years.

Protection of Participants. The researcher has omitted personally identifiable information from this study, and a copy of the consent form as well as the interview protocol were provided to participants in advance of the interview. Each participant was given a pseudonym for the study and had the right to withdraw from participation at any point.

Researcher as Instrument in Data Collection

Qualitative research methods use the researcher as the instrument for collecting data and interpreting its results (Hays & Singh, 2012). In addition, qualitative research approaches accept that data are subjective and that bias is a natural part of research. More specifically, qualitative research identifies and embraces the researcher's unique experiences, perspectives, knowledge, beliefs, and assumptions. Narrative research specifically seeks to understand not only the lived experience of the participants but the ways in which the researcher impacts that story and/or how the researcher is situated in participants' narratives (Clandinin, 2016). The factors that impact the biases of the researcher allow for a unique positionality, and I identify the ways my positionality impacts this study in the next section.

Researcher Positionality

I am a first-generation college student and have spent my entire professional career as a higher education administrator. Despite, or perhaps because of, my first-generation student status, I have had significant academic and career success. I am

committed to both the success of individual students and the ongoing success of strong educational institutions. At this time, I do not desire to be a college president, but my administrative roles have continually piqued my interest in the roles of the college president. In addition, early in my career while working with a leadership program for men of color, many who were first-generation, the president facilitated an informal question and answer period with program participants. The president prided himself on being first-generation and when a student asked why he wore a tie every day, the president's answer allowed me to begin seeing into the regular challenges of navigating senior leadership roles in higher education as a first-generation college student. "When you wear a bow-tie no one questions whether you should be in the room—it gains you automatic access," he quickly responded. As a young professional at the time, I felt a deep ah-ha moment, but it took years of processing to understand my own feeling and the feelings the president must have gone through every day to just fit in among his academic peers. I assumed walking a tightrope between my first-generation working-class roots and the academic jockeying that occurs on college campuses would be something I would eventually grow out of or navigate with ease. Realizing it would be with me throughout my entire career, I felt an immediate sense of burden but also a feeling of pride. I began to understand that university leaders who were first-generation college students navigate their identities daily, and identifying my fellow first-generations among the administration became easier.

I attended a small, private, liberal arts college in the Midwest. The college of fewer than 2000 students was about 75 miles from my hometown, which had a population of 1200. Many generations of my family have been raised, lived, and died in

that small town. I did not choose to attend the college that I attended because of strong academic programs, future earning potential, or its national reputation. I enrolled because the college offered me a better financial aid package than the local campus of the state university system. Despite having planned to attend the local state university, I recall distinctly that once I received the financial aid letter from my now–alma mater, I felt a sense of clarity that the decision was now made, yet there was discomfort at the prospect of wading into the unknown. My educational success was catapulted by getting quickly and deeply engaged in student life at the small college I attended. Within six months my feelings of uncertainty became feelings of comfort, appropriate challenge, and great pride. There was a specific moment a few months after beginning college that a trip home to my parents about 70 miles away was extended due to appendicitis. When I returned to campus three days later, my entire floor came to see me and had flowers on my desk in my residence hall room. I distinctly recall the feeling of recognizing that I now felt seen, needed, and appreciated at college. I threw myself into every leadership role, and with strong mentoring on my side from my dean of students and other administrators, I became student body president my junior year. My parents did not attend college and could only support from afar as I attempted to explain some of my successes with a mixture of joy and struggle. Despite my parents not attending college and not knowing how to best support their children's higher education pursuits, both of their children earned terminal degrees. My sister is two years my senior and she earned her doctor of chiropractic degree immediately after finishing her undergraduate degree. Pondering both of our advanced degrees and educational success, I am fascinated by what catapults high

educational attainment for one generation after multiple generations of lower educational attainment from a theoretical level but also from a real, personal, lived perspective.

My educational experience sparked a passion and calling to help other students use their college experience as a path to overcome barriers to create a brighter future for themselves. My small-town family and community couldn't understand my desire to obtain my master's degree 500 miles away when there were plenty of colleges within a couple hours' drive. After attending a relatively unknown small private college, I remember being exhilarated by the opportunity to attend one of the top student affairs programs in the country at a flagship university with over 50,000 students. I soaked up every aspect of that opportunity, and since obtaining my master's degree, I have worked at four different campuses. The campuses with the highest percentages of first-generation students have always felt the most like home, I also remember feeling honored when I was able to gain the credibility of students and peers at a highly selective liberal arts college in the Mid-Atlantic where only 7 percent of the students were first-generation. Like other invisible marginalized identities, being a first-generation student comes with varied emotions of shame and joy. Sometimes I relish in the identity and other times I feel joy in "passing."

Each of my past experiences impacts my subjectivity on understanding the experiences of college presidents who were first-generation students. After recognizing that one of my former presidents wore a bow-tie daily as a way of passing in academia, I have continued to identify ways my first-generation colleagues and I take steps to be accepted in the academy. Living in two worlds at once is something that we never fully reconcile. Each time I drive home to visit my family for holidays I am excited to see

people who mean the world to me, but I am also reminded that they will never understand the past decade and a half of my life or what it is that I do professionally. Despite these challenges, my experience has also been that first-generation students and peers have an inherent appreciation of higher education as well as resiliency skills I see less frequently in non-first-generation students. Throughout my career I have become increasingly able to identify first-generation peers and students by their willingness to accept support or mentorship at any point but occasional reluctance to seek it out, as well as a work ethic that is second to none. All these experiences helped me not only connect with my participants in this study of college presidents who were first-generation college students but also helped me make sense of the data collected.

Throughout my own experiences, however, I have also gained a deeper understanding of social justice and a sharper critical lens. I now see how unhealthy my desire to pass among the educated elite was earlier in my career, and I cannot help but recognize the ways in which my dominant identities, specifically being a White man, impact my success on a regular basis. I may be a gay man. I may be a first-generation student, but I am still a White man, and this identity provides me privileges. My experiences, my critical lens, and who I am today position me within this study in a unique and multi-faceted way to critique all aspects of this research including the ways in which participants' identities provided them unearned privileges. My own experiences of recognizing how my privilege has helped me advance, how it has sheltered me from adversity, and yet how it has also at times been a detriment in my personal relationships and interactions with people of color were useful when I interpreted and analyzed the

stories of participants. It allowed me to understand their personal stories from critical lenses that participants themselves did not articulate on their own.

Data Collection

The primary data collection technique was narrative interviews. The researcher developed a semi-structured interview protocol based on the research questions and guided by Harper's (2010) anti-deficit achievement framework. The framework allowed participants to identify their own success as well as the ways they successfully navigated oppressive systems and unfamiliar environments. This approach was consistent with the narrative method of creating an environment where participants help the interviewer understand their experience and the participant has an opportunity to make meaning of their own experiences (Hays & Singh, 2012; McLeod, 2001). The interview protocol was provided to each participant a week or more prior to the interview. The semi-structured questions served the purpose of guiding the interview, but participants were encouraged to share their narrative in any way that made sense to them. The interviewer asked additional questions to clarify and expand the narrative, which allowed for interaction and shared story-telling among the participant and researcher. Each interview was audio-recorded and later transcribed. Summary field notes were made after each interview to identify key learnings and themes that emerged from the interview.

Data Analysis

There are multiple uses of data generated from social science research. Reissman (2008) identified the uses as nested issues, with the top level including the interpretive process of listening, the next as the interpreted accounts developed by the researcher based on data, and finally the account that the reader constructs through engaging with

the researcher's interpretation and the data presented (Chase, 2013; Reissman, 2008). The researcher is responsible for the first two levels, and through the researcher's analysis, they seek to understand not just what occurred but the reason behind aspects of the narrative from the participant's perspective. Narrative analysis allowed the researcher to identify meaningful patterns that may seem random and disconnected to others (Klotz, 2013; Riessman, 2008). Narratives shared demonstrated how participants see themselves within systems, and understanding the impact of the system on the individual was a necessary aspect of data analysis for this study. The researcher engaged in a detailed and thorough analysis of the interaction and transcribed text to identify the commentary that is evident in participant's stories.

To prepare for each interview, the researcher reviewed each participant's biography on their university's Web site in detail and made notes where necessary. All data collected via interviews were reviewed multiple times. The primary review occurred immediately after each interview. The researcher made notes of observations, feelings, and emerging themes in reflexive journal format. This was done after the interview and not during, because it was important that the interviews be conversational in nature with as few notes taken as possible. Another review of the data occurred once transcripts were completed. After both reviews of data, individual narratives were created for each participant with two or three emerging themes identified within each narrative. After individual narratives were created, the data was reviewed a third time for themes across the narratives. To assist in this process, codes that emerged were identified and grouped by topic to answer the researcher questions of the study. Harper's (2010) anti-deficit achievement framework was used to identify strengths-based and achievement language

within the codes. Dedoose, a qualitative database, was used to assist with managing this process and accurately identifying the prevalence and strength of codes. Once the strength and prevalence of codes within the narratives was understood, codes were grouped into final themes based on the research questions.

Trustworthiness

Building trust in the research design is essential, yet scholars vary in their approaches to increase trustworthiness. For the purposes of this study, trustworthiness will be supported by reflexive journaling, member checking, dual analysis of data as individual narrative themes and themes across narratives, and use of thick descriptive data with many direct quotes from participants.

Reflexive Journaling. The researcher engaged in regular written reflections on interactions between the researcher and participants, recording thoughts, responses, and observations. Reflexive journaling ensured that the researcher maintained an appropriate relationship with his own perspectives and lived experiences separate from those of the participants (Norkunas, 2011). Reflexive journaling supported trustworthiness, credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, the hallmarks of effective qualitative researcher (Lincoln & Guba, 1995). Reflective practices allow the researcher to better understand himself within the research and for the purposes of this study were used to understand perspective, biases, power, privilege, and assumptions associated with the research. Specifically, reflexive journaling allowed for interactions, observations, and feelings that contributed not only to the content shared but the full experience of interacting with the participant. From a critical perspective, reflexive journaling created a mechanism to identify points where power and privilege impacted the participant's story,

the researcher's story, and the interaction between the researcher and participant by identifying those things in writing to make meaning of them so that the researcher could determine if they were merely reactions or if they were data germane to the research.

Member checking. Upon completion of transcripts, participants were provided an electronic copy via e-mail and offered the opportunity to read and respond. This process gave the participants an opportunity to correct any errors, volunteer additional information, and clarify any context (Lincoln & Guba, 1995). Member checking was voluntary and not required of participants but served to increase trustworthiness. Three of the nine participants provided feedback and edits and six declined the opportunity to member check. Responses from member checking clarified points participants made.

Ethical Issues

All studies have ethical issues that must be accounted for in the research design stage. In this study, there were two primary ethical issues that were factored into research design including studying professionals that are at a higher professional level than the researcher as well as preserving the confidentiality of participants.

Researching Up

The participants of this study were college presidents and held a higher status in the academy than the researcher. Researching up required acknowledgement that power differentials are at play in the interview and throughout the research process (Aguiar & Schneider, 2012). The participants held positions of power and authority on their campuses, yet in a research setting, the researcher often held the position of power. In addition, many of the participants had research backgrounds due to their academic credentials, so attention to detail in the design of the study was essential. Working

diligently to protect the confidentiality of participants and minimize risk is very important when studying up (Aguiar & Schneider, 2012; Klotz, 2014).

Confidentiality

Participants were informed of the risks associated with participation in this study. Each participant signed a written informed consent document and identifying information was carefully managed. Specifically, identifying information such as geographic region, institution size, and the profile or demographics of the institution over which they presided were described with enough detail to be useful data but provided little identifiable information. For example, their institutions were noted as a private liberal arts college in the Midwest or a community college in the Southeast. Because participants are highly public figures it was important to account for their confidentiality. Finally, while holding interviews in their office was the desired location for the researcher, the participants were offered an option to participate in a location that was confidential for participants' needs if they did not wish their staff to know they participated.

Chapter Summary

Chapter 3 outlined the research design and detailed methodology for this narrative inquiry of college presidents who were first-generation college students. The chapter argued that a narrative inquiry best meets the needs of this population and included an epistemological stance of the researcher as well as his positionality in the research. Procedures for recruiting participants, conducting interviews, and analyzing the data were presented as well as research design elements to support trustworthiness and confidentiality. Chapter 4 will introduce the individual narratives of the participants of the study, identifying emerging themes from each participant's individual narrative.

CHAPTER 4

INDIVIDUAL PARTICIPANT NARRATIVES

> I don't hide where I came from or what I did. That said, it took me awhile to fully appreciate what this early rural experience meant to my life and professional career. For decades I was extremely cautious about revealing this farming past. How utterly foolish this was in retrospect. (Durden, 2013, p. 33)

Using narrative inquiry with a critical lens and an anti-deficit achievement framework, the aims of this study were to identify what factors contributed to the skills of college presidents who were first-generation college students and make meaning of navigating social class in academia, just as Durden did in his opening quote of the chapter as he moved from shame to pride in his first-generation college identity. Three research questions guided this study:

> **RQ1:** What compelled and enabled college presidents who were first-generation college students to transcend educational and career obstacles?
>
> **RQ2:** What factors allowed college presidents who were first-generation college students to cultivate presidential aspirations and preparedness for the role?
>
> **RQ 3:** What is unique about the ways college presidents who were first-generation college students approach their roles as president?

Nine interviews were conducted on the campuses of nine different college presidents. Eight of the nine interviews occurred in presidents' offices, allowing the researcher insight into the physical space where that president's individual narrative

operates. One occurred in common spaces on the president's campus. This chapter introduces each president and their individual narratives, and Chapter 5 will serve the purpose of identifying the themes that emerged across the nine narratives. Prior to sharing the individual narrative of each participant in this chapter, I will explain the process that shaped each story and how the narratives were collected.

Organizing the Findings

As detailed in Chapter 3, after each interview, the researcher wrote field notes in reflexive journal format capturing his experience, feelings, and reactions to the interview as well as the trends that dominated the narrative shared by the participant. The interviews were recorded and a transcription was made; each participant had an opportunity to review their transcript for accuracy. These two pieces of data were woven together from the lens of the researcher to create a comprehensive narrative that reflects the participant's experience and the salient aspects of their story. Consistent with narrative inquiry, the researcher became a part of the participants' lives and vice versa, which resulted in both the researcher and the participant being under study together (Clandinin, 2016). From this perspective, the reflexive journal served to summarize the narrative while the transcript provided supplemental details in the participant's voice. It is the interaction, however, that gave meaning to both.

For each participant below, their individual narrative will begin with a first-person introduction from the researcher written in a reflective tone. The introduction was written based on the researcher's experience and notes and serves to highlight the environment where the interviews occurred as well as the researcher's personal response to the setting. Following the introduction for each participant, a brief narrative is provided, which

highlights a key aspect of that participant's demeanor or their approach to their role as president. Demographic information on the participant and their current campus follows with enough detail to give the narrative context while keeping the participant's identity confidential. Each participant has been given a pseudonym throughout their narratives to further increase confidentiality in the study. If participants noted key individuals in their lives, those individuals have also been given pseudonyms. Some of the participants in this study use the title of chancellor in lieu of president on their campuses. Despite their title at their institution, each participant will be referred to as president throughout for consistency and to increase confidentiality. The introduction and narratives for each participant are intended to give readers an understanding of the ways each participant overcame obstacles presented by their first-generation student identity to succeed as undergraduates, in advanced-degree study, and in their careers, as well as to identify the unique ways each participant approaches their role as president.

Michael Wright, JD

Having worked in higher education for over a decade, the only times I found myself in the office of a president was when there was a crisis. A student was near death, or a significant lawsuit had been filed due to a disciplinary decision and I had a specific role to play in navigating the aftermath. Because of my experiences, being summoned to a president's office has always involved high levels of stress and quick decision making. I felt all those emotions impacting me as I began my first interview with President Wright, despite his campus being one where I had spent considerable time in the past. I found myself uneasily waiting in the reception area of his office suite—a standard higher-end but not overly ornate office suite that was shared with other senior leaders at his

regional state institution. Another executive in the office suite was holding an on-campus interview, likely for a high-level academic position. As I waited for President Wright, I engaged in small talk with the professor who informed me he was chairing the search. He was waiting for the candidate to come out of a senior administrator's office so that he could shuttle the candidate to the next interview. Our conversation was easy and natural. Growing up in this part of the country, I knew how to engage folks and share just enough information for us to be interested in conversation with one another, yet not too much as to pry into each other's lives.

Prior to meeting with Wright, I had been visiting my family at my childhood home, just 30 miles from his campus. I had two interviews scheduled during my visit but purposefully had not packed a tie for my meetings. Wearing dress slacks and a button-downed shirt was a strategic decision. I knew these communities and recognized that overdressing was perceived as pretention. I was relieved to see I had hit the mark as Wright and I were dressed similarly. The day before my meeting with President Wright, I had received an e-mail from a faculty member at his institution who had heard of my meeting and was intrigued by my research. She requested we meet to discuss our research further. She ended her e-mail stating that she was certain "I would enjoy my time with the president as he is very open and honest." She had understated open and honest, and hearing him use a few curse words within the first fifteen minutes of our interview, I quickly felt at ease and familiarity with Wright. His story was a unique one with fascinating twists and turns and many obstacles overcome. His candor and willingness to use crass and colorful language made me feel as though I was sitting with someone I had known for years in their living room catching up over drinks. Our conversation went

almost two hours, and at each turn of his narrative I found myself amazed by his sense of self, sense of justice, and focus on relationships.

A Master Class in Resiliency: President Wright's Story

In law school one of Wright's professors referred to a comment he made in class as stupid. Later that day Wright went to the professor's office to make it clear that no one can talk to him in that way. He told the professor, "You can call all of these other people stupid if you want to, but you're not going to call me stupid." Wright shared with me that he recognized that this confrontation with his professor might have gotten him thrown out of law school, yet he was unconcerned about that potential outcome. As Wright put it, "I was doing fine before I went to law school, but you don't get to treat me that way." A direct approach to conflict and problematic behavior is a cornerstone of Wright's. He developed his signature no-nonsense demeanor throughout a life's path riddled with challenges that have forced him to be self-sufficient early in life, independently assess his own self-worth, and manage his educational and career path with no consistent familial support.

Michael Wright is a 62-year old African American man who serves as president for a public master's institution with an enrollment of just under 9000 in the rural Midwest. His current position is his first presidency, which he has held for seven years. Wright earned his undergraduate degree from a small, private, religiously affiliated college in the Midwest and his juris doctorate from a large, public, flagship institution in the Midwest. Thirty to 35 percent of the students at Wright's institution are first-generation college students.

Wright spent the first five years of his life in an orphanage, which he shared was common for the child of an unwed mother who had no father involved in his life. Once reaching the age limit of five for the orphanage, he spent his childhood in and out of numerous foster homes, often with working-class White families. During formative years of his childhood, however, he stayed for a few years with an African American doctor and his wife in a small rural town in the Midwest. The doctor had attended a prestigious historically Black college in the segregated South, and he and his wife had lived in numerous places, garnering life experiences that were uncommon in the rural Midwestern town. Each summer Wright's foster family would take road trips to New England, where his foster mother was raised, and would stop to visit friends and family members of his foster parents. "And so, early 60s I'm seeing the full range of socioeconomic African Americans. While he had some very impoverished relatives and friends he also had peers who were doctors, lawyers, et cetera." Reflecting back Wright realized, "I saw this range and it didn't strike me as unusual that you could be African American and a doctor, even you know, someone from my station." Not only did his African American foster family expose Wright to a variety of socioeconomic statuses among peers but they also opened his eyes to types of music that were not available on the radio in his rural hometown in the Midwest. Fighting for what is right was encouraged by the family, and Wright recalled living with this family while watching the march on Washington on television, as well as JFK's assassination.

Despite leaving the family at the age of 11 due to his foster parents' divorce, the seeds that were planted by his time with them continued to grow throughout his life. Wright recalled reading *Malcolm X* on his own in eighth grade. Independence and self-

reliance became a theme throughout Wright's life after leaving the foster family and spending time at a group home for boys. Despite the challenging demeanors among the 40 boys at the home, Wright concentrated on his own success with precision. School came easy for him, and living in a state with strong public education, he excelled academically. Always having a book in hand, Wright did well on standardized testing, and in the eighth grade he scored the highest in his class. He dedicated his energy to exceeding at anything he studied and took up basketball with a level of attention to detail and commitment uncommon in teenagers. Reminiscing, Wright shared:

> And I was the kind of kid that if there was something that I didn't get—it didn't matter what it was—so in 8th grade, and I was always a basketball player—I used to shoot. And I made the observation watching [a player] on TV that no one shot that way. So, I went to the library and found a book. It said on the cover *Greatest Jump Shooter in the History of Basketball, Bob Pettit*. So, I checked it out, and read it. Looked at the diagrams and changed what I was doing. So that was the sort of the way I engaged.

Wright's directness, conviction, and self-confidence have been his greatest forms of perseverance, but these characteristics have created challenges for him. Wright also has a side of him that can be softer and quieter and intensely dedicated to relationships once he establishes trust. Gaining his trust is not easy, but it was relationships that balanced him when temper got the best of him. At 14 years old he was kicked out of his group home when he got into an altercation with the director in front of members of the home's board. The father of a close friend of his had told him that if he ever needed a

place to stay he could live with them, a story Wright shared very matter-of-factly but with great reverence for the father:

> I was at their household one weekend. And you know I could spend a weekend at his house and around his family but if he said 10 words in my presence while I was there on a given weekend that would have been a lot. So, it was time to go home—for them to take me back to the boy's home one time and he says, "I want you to sit down, young man." I didn't know if he had ever spoken directly to me before that point. I may be exaggerating—but so I sat down and he sat down. He looked at me and says, "If you ever need a place to stay, you have a place here, you understand?" I'm like, ok. And then he said "ok" and we got up and left.

When kicked out of the group home, Wright took his friend's father up on his offer and moved in with their family, where he stayed until he finished high school. Next, was college. "I didn't consciously decide I could handle college—it's just sort of what happened." Doing well on standardized tests, Wright had received letters from prestigious universities, but he wanted to play basketball. His guidance counselors were not helpful and were likely unaware of the caliber of schools that were contacting him. His self-awareness and tenacity allowed him to navigate the process:

> I was self-aware enough to know that I wasn't going to play at that level. The exposure I'd gotten to Division 1 basketball players even at the age of 16-17-18—it was a different animal than I was. But I still wanted to compete.

Wright attended a small, private, religiously affiliated college in his home state. College came easily to Wright from an academic perspective, but he needed to be challenged in his courses and to feel a connection with the professors or authority figures

to appreciate or trust them. More specifically, any sense of ego or injustice was off-putting to Wright. He spoke of a work-study job that resulted in him being late for a sociology course, and when the professor confronted him, Wright had little time for the professor's ego or religiously informed approach to sociology. "I saw through him pretty early on… I took to bringing other stuff to class to read because he bored me." In another instance an assistant basketball coach did not call a foul after Wright had been struck hard by a peer during a scrimmage. Wright felt the action was rooted in racism, so he called out the assistant coach in front of teammates. Wright quickly earned a reputation for himself at the small college. "I was willing to speak up if someone in the class said something that was crazy or racist or something, I would say something back to them. And so, I became a leader of sorts there."

While growing in his leadership skills and developing his identity as an advocate, Wright also worked to reconcile his identity as an African American man on a White, rural college campus. His campus had a very small population of African American students and many of his African American peers were from cities. Most were unfamiliar with maneuvering rural White environments—something Wright had done most of his life. Many of his African American peers were skeptical of him but began to appreciate his commitment to core principles:

> So, the general environment of the campus was not all that unusual for me. It was very similar to what I grew up in. Interesting dynamic with the African American students because I was a complete different animal to them. I felt comfortable in that environment, I didn't come with the city orientation—that sort of thing. Which, I think if you had talked to them then they would have thought I was very

> odd. But, my junior year I was president of the Black Student Union. I served as president of the Black Student Union for both years—in part I think because they realized that I was being successful academically and I didn't take stuff from anybody. If an administrator or professor or coach wanted to get sideways with me I was willing to go toe-to-toe. And I knew how to deal with them. And so, they—I think they kind of got, okay—we don't know where you're coming from but we know he's got what it takes to do this.

Despite the challenges he faced in college, there was one person who was a constant support source for Wright. In sixth grade, one of Wright's teachers became someone he appreciated and looked up to for guidance. The teacher took an interest in Wright and by the time Wright attended college, the teacher was a principal at a school nearby. The teacher's wife worked in an advising capacity at the college he attended. His teacher's wife was a trusted source of support and challenge for Wright and he talked of her with great affinity. "We all need someone like that. Usually it's your mom, right? Who you know—they're on your side. Obviously, everybody else is wrong. She was that person in some environments for me." In addition to being a voice of reason for Wright, his teacher's wife was the first person to suggest law school to Wright—which would quickly become a career ambition after her suggestion:

> It had never occurred to me. I mean, I was a business major. I was a business major for the simple idea is that given my background I wanted to be able to get a job. … I was much more passionate about history and political science. But she suggested that to me and there was another faculty member who was the pre-law

> advisor/history professor who had just gone to law school and so I was able to sort of think that through.

Wright talked with great passion about books that he read that got him excited about case law and a legal career. Going on to get his law degree would serve Wright well later in life when decisions he was a part of regarding admission policies were taken all the way to the Supreme Court. After college Wright spent a couple years working before pursuing law school. His undergraduate grades were not exceptional, and his LSAT score was mediocre—top grades were never as important to him as content mastery. He attended the flagship institution in his home state because it was the most affordable for law school. Wright credits working prior to law school as giving him perspective to deal with the highly competitive and ego-driven nature of law school. His life experiences helped with his tenacity and perseverance as well. Wright described his first year of law school as something he participated in and did okay at but not something he took very seriously. It was again individuals who took an interest in Wright's success that resulted in him getting more invested and taking law school seriously. Amid an in-class feedback session about an argument he presented in moot court, a young professor told him, "You did a great job at making your case in a novel way, but your brief isn't very good." Valuing direct feedback, Wright followed up with her:

> So, I went to see her and she spent two hours with me. She did two things. She looked at what I'd written and we talked about the substance of it, like if you're going to use this case to support this argument, you may want to do it here. You may want to structure your argument … Which I was like, okay, it sort of pushed a button for me. The other thing she said to me, she said, "You know, you have a

> number of incomplete sentences in your brief, Michael. I know you can write in complete sentences, what that says to me is you didn't make the appropriate effort." … But here's the thing you've got to understand is that for African American students, a lot of times they don't get that sort of direct feedback. And they get it so seldom that often times they don't know what to do with it when it happens, particularly at majority institutions. … I can imagine how many times somebody read something that I wrote that could have been better and they said, "Well that's pretty good, that's good enough" … whereas, if they thought it was a talented White kid and they saw something, so this could be better, I'm going to help him try to figure—learn how to make this better. Soft bigotry of low expectations and she had the courage to do that and it was—I probably got more out of that session than anything else I ever did in law school.

As others began taking an interest in Wright, he understood the benefit of mentors and began seeking them on his own. Wright sought out his dean of admissions, a Black man, who stood up for Wright and supported him throughout law school. The dean offered Wright a part-time position during his third year of law school assisting with minority recruitment, a role that would permanently alter his career path. As he neared completion of his law degree, Wright took a full-time job helping run the law school admissions office for his mentor, despite having an offer in a public defender's office. During an admission recruiting trip, Wright was interacting with a pre-law advisor and faculty member saw potential in Wright and said to him, "'Well, you know, you could be a college president.' I was like 'are you kidding me?' That was the first time anybody had

ever said that to me." Though he was unsure how to receive the message at the time, the seed was planted.

After a decade in admissions at the institution where he received his law degree, Wright felt he had gone as far as he could in his role. He was selected as dean of admissions for a law school at another large public institution in the Midwest. His new institution had a higher national profile than the previous institution, and he described a sharp contrast in the individuals he interacted with daily:

> People were just really smart and comfortable being really smart and saying what they think … [they] look at you and say what you said doesn't sound very smart, you need to say it differently so that I can get what the hell you're talking about.

The role kept Wright challenged for six years. After that, Wright noted that he "voted with my feet and left there because the dean that was running stuff got on my nerves." While in the position Wright learned firsthand about politics and the interaction of the legal system and higher education—the institution was named in a lawsuit claiming their affirmative action policy in admissions was discriminatory, which went to the Supreme Court. Wright was a named as a defendant and the institution's policy was upheld in court, which Wright spoke of as a source of pride because it demonstrated his commitment to integrity. Wright left the institution to be dean of admissions at another law school. His new institution had a strong national profile as well, but this time he was at a private university in the Southeast.

Wright's former mentor from his own law school experience had gone on to be a president of a college and challenged Wright to consider becoming a dean of a law school. Uncertain that his academic credentials were sufficient, Wright explored the

option when he learned his mentor had nominated him for a deanship. He went on to become the dean of a law school for a start-up for-profit institution—a challenge Wright loved because he got to build everything from the ground up, earn accreditation for the institution, and run the school with autonomy. As the institution grew, however, its bureaucracy, management philosophy, and lack of focus on scholarship began to trouble Wright. In addition, the CEO's tactics did not coincide with Wright's straightforward demeanor and approach to education. After sharing his concerns about the way the vice president was interfering with the work of the deans, Wright's days were numbered. Wright's strong opinions and clear moral compass did not align with the institution's goals. It became evident he needed to continue his career elsewhere. Wright was comfortable parting ways with a one-year sabbatical.

Wright continued to be in touch with his mentor from his law school who had nominated him for the Millennium Institute within the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU), a program geared toward preparing underrepresented college administrators for executive positions. While participating in the program, his mentor also asked him to run the student affairs division at the university he presided over, a public access institution in a large city in the Northeast. After three vice presidents overseeing the area in five years, his mentor sought to fill the role with someone he trusted. Successful in his vice president role, it was not long before Wright applied for his current position and was selected as president. Wright remembered the adjustment back to a familiar environment with affinity. "I'm coming from the city, everybody thought, 'Well we have this big city lawyer coming.' I'm like, I grew up in a town like this."

As president, Wright's direct yet relational approach has continued, and he maintains a keen understanding of the ways in which policies impact first-generation students at his institution. Wright continues to know exactly who he is, what his values and priorities are, and still has little time for egos:

> I don't ever pretend to be a scholar, that's not the path that I followed. I remember this wonderful retired philosophy professor tried to bust my chops when I interviewed here about whether I was a scholar and I said, "Well I'm not. You've seen my resume, I'm not. If that's what you want, that's not me."

At his institution, teaching is top priority, which Wright values. He takes the commitment to teaching very seriously and makes his approach to tenure clear to his faculty. "Ninety-nine percent of the cases, I don't have a position one way or the other, but if someone is clearly a bad teacher, I'm not signing off on their tenure. I don't care what the faculty say." Despite, or perhaps because of, his direct approach, Wright is passionate about getting the right people in the right positions and letting them excel at their roles. He also recognizes the role of shared governance on college campuses and that no one gets their way all the time. One aspect of his role that he will not compromise on, however, is prioritizing the student experience. Wright emphasized the need to graduate low-income first-generation students more quickly, especially those going into lower-paying careers like education, a large program at his university:

> I want to be really supportive of faculty, tenured faculty, that kind of thing, but they're in a position to take care of themselves. They've got a job, they've got a job for life essentially. They want to be making a difference at the institution, they can decide and figure out how to do it.

Wright sees his top concern as advocating for students and committing to their outcomes while making clear the identity and needs of the students at his institution:

> We have to teach the students we have, not the ones we wish we had. So, if you complain about students being underprepared, I said, this—we're a point of access, this is who we are. So, I don't want to talk about remedial classes, I want to say, well how do we get the students to where they need to be?

To summarize Wright's approach to his presidency, "I'm probably different in that I'm probably a little more willing to say out loud what I'm thinking than most of my peers." This is a skill set Wright mastered at an early age when he realized he would have to be his own advocate in life, but it is one that has served him well.

Individual Themes from President Wright

Role models, relationships, and mentors as resiliency tools. "I guess the theme that I would tell you about is that at different points in my life there's always somebody who pushed some button that moved you along." Wright recounted the role that mentors played in his life, but in reviewing his story it is clear they not only directed him, they also served as resiliency tools allowing him to navigate unfamiliar terrain. When he was kicked out of a group home, he persevered by moving in with a friend's family whose father had previously told him he was welcome any time. When he was unsure of his career path, his mentor in college suggested law school. As Wright progressed as a student and professional he began actively seeking out mentors, specifically mentors who were Black men. Most notable was the mentor he acquired in law school, whom he sought out, an African American man who continued to mentor him throughout his career. Not only did these individuals serve as support to Wright but they helped him

understand who he could be in this life. They helped him be resilient when dealing with racism and made him feel like less of an outsider as an African American man in White spaces.

Strong self-efficacy rooted in integrity and commitment to values. When Wright sets his mind to learn something or accomplishing a task, little can get in his way. His resolve and determination are some of his greatest strengths, and occasionally they are also a challenge for him when others do not share his level of determination and values-based decision-making. Wright values people who demonstrate their integrity to him. He values direct communication and individuals showing their true selves. This was demonstrated in his conversations with his sociology professor in college, his assistant basketball coach, the law professor who referred to his comment as stupid, and a supervisor who he felt was not living up to stated institutional values. In addition, Wright has a confidence about him that if the right people are in place, they can collectively tackle any problem. Wright also has an inimitable way of taking all information he receives and saving it for use at a time when appropriate or needed, which also contributes to his confidence and strong sense of self:

> What we do a lot of times is we think we've got to figure out what we're going to do with every piece of information as we get it and I've never thought about it that way. I think you take it in and there's no telling when it will make sense to you. It may make sense tomorrow, but it might be six months, it may be a year, it may be five years. But you take it in and you never know the value of it until you take in more.

Wright carefully uses information when it is needed to solve problems or overcome obstacles. He also uses consistency in the messages he hears from others to measure their integrity and ensure deep levels of trust. All of these experiences have shaped one of the key aspects to his approach as president—hiring great people, training them well, and giving them unwavering support. “Your people will support you if they know that you have their back, if you’re not throwing them under the bus.”

Dr. Andrew Murray

Within an hour and a half of receiving my e-mail request to participate, Dr. Murray, who requested in his e-mail response that I call him Andy, gladly accepted my invitation to participate and applauded my research topic. Each communication with him was directly from Andy, including arranging the date and sending me parking instructions for his campus. For many participants an assistant arranged these details, but not with Andy. He was kind and accommodating in each of his responses, which made me very excited to meet him. His personal approach, excitement, and flexibility provided an intimacy and comfort even prior to connecting in person. Andy’s campus was also within a couple of hours’ drive from my childhood home in the Midwest. I have a cousin who lives near the campus, and I made a family affair out of the day by visiting with my family prior to and after the interview with Andy. Perhaps it was that the day involved family, that I had one interview already under my belt, or that his campus’s size and aesthetic was similar to my own undergraduate campus, but my interview with Andy was extremely comfortable, personal, and enjoyable.

It was the middle of summer on campus when I pulled up in my parents’ car that I had borrowed to drive to the interview. The campus had a calm and slow pace that only

summer can provide. I again wore a button-down shirt and dress slacks, omitting a tie for fear of it being seen as pretentious in the rural Midwest. Similar to my own campus, the liberal arts college was in a relatively quiet neighborhood within a mid-sized city. Andy's office was on the second floor of a relatively small building housing administrative offices. I would estimate the building to be not more than a decade old, but it appeared to be built to mimic the older architecture of the charming campus. The president was about two minutes late for our 10:30AM appointment and apologized profusely for keeping me waiting. Having worked in higher education for over a decade, waiting for a senior executive often meant a significant waiting period, so I had not perceived our 10:32 start as late. Andy came out to greet me in the waiting area with a warm smile and escorted me into his ornate office space that included a casual sitting area with a couch and armchairs. I sat on the couch and he in a chair across from me. Andy also apologized for not preparing as well for the interview as he had hoped he would have been able to.

Kindness and Competency: President Murray's Story

As I had finished telling Andy that he was free to share his story in any way that he was most comfortable with, his kindness emanated:

> I can't believe you're inviting us just to talk about ourselves … that's something we don't—at least I don't often wish to do. So, it's very kind of you to listen. So please stop me or redirect me if it becomes boring or off track.

I quickly reassured Andy that I would follow him wherever he wanted to go in the conversation. He again thanked me and proceeded.

Andrew Murray is a 56-year old White man who serves as president for a private, baccalaureate liberal arts college with an enrollment of 1400 in a mid-sized city in the

Midwest. His current role is his first presidency, which he began three years ago. Despite spending his entire career at private colleges, Murray earned all of his degrees at public institutions. He earned his undergraduate and master's degrees from the same large public open-access institution in the Midwest. He received his EdD while working full-time at a small private university in the Northeast. Murray's current institution does not actively track the number of first-generation students enrolled.

Growing up in an industrial mid-sized city in the Midwest, a blue-collar lifestyle was the expectation and norm for Murray. He attended a public high school in his city, where African American students made up 93% of the population at the school. Students at his high school were encouraged to take part in a vocational program such as auto body or secretarial studies offered by the school and most students came from low-income, blue-collar families. His school experience had a big impact on Murray:

> I grew up feeling like you had to be afraid of the world, you wander into school and you're the youngest, skinniest, Whitest person … and there was a lot of violence, there really was. I was in the hospital multiple times, there was a great many fights, it was—it was a tough spot. So you develop a real ability to stand up for yourself—you have to, it's survival.

Murray is a reserved man who is fairly small in stature and exudes kindness, calmness, and compassion. Imagining him getting into fights is difficult. Despite the difficult environment at his school, Murray excelled in classes:

> The thing I was best at probably was school. But that wasn't valued and so I was active in a lot of other things, student activities and music and sports, things like that. And that's where all of the peer regard came from … I mean, you had to

> hide—not to sound arrogant—but if you were smart, you had to hide that … that wasn't cool.

As a teenager Murray got involved in his church, which helped him find community and build resilience. His faith still plays a large role in his life today. "Church was the first place I met people who weren't out to steal stuff from me or get in a fight." When describing the role that church played in his life, Murray shared that it provided him the "combination of standing up for yourself and devotion to principle you have to have to get through that tougher background." Murray would have been the third generation to work in tire factories, something that was assumed in his family. Growing up, he didn't consider college—it was actively discouraged in his family:

> My mother had completed a secretarial track in high school, but that was the only member of my family to ever finish high school. My dad was a drop-out, my grandfather had dropped out in 8th grade. My other grandfather immigrated to the U.S. from Scotland but had not completed schooling before coming over. So, just nobody knew anything about college. But—and so that's typical, I think, of first-generation students. What might have been different in my case than some was how actively hostile my family and environment was toward the idea of higher education. So there was the neglectful part, but then there was the very disdainful part about how unrealistic and how out of touch higher ed is and how worthless it was.

As Murray grew up, his factory opportunities dwindled as factories closed or relocated. Murray was an excellent student and began to consider college more seriously.

He graduated top of his class and likely could have attended the college or university of his choice but instead enrolled at the local state university:

> I got the National Merit Scholarship, so I had money for college but no plans for college. So I did what most of my neighborhood did if they went to college—they live at home, they work, and they go to the local university … I thought it was high school at the next level. I didn't know what a Registrar was or Financial Aid Office … the vast majority either did what I did, lived at home, or lived in housing around campus and worked … and so what should have been a joyous kind of academic experience wasn't. It was a grind.

Murray's university was an urban campus—large buildings interspersed with other buildings in the city and no clear boundaries. It was the only type of institution he knew, so it was the opportunity he took. He recalled a trip to a small, private, residential liberal arts campus two hours away later in life to watch a girlfriend's brother in a tennis match. "I didn't even know places like this existed. Places I could have easily gotten in and [had] paid for." Murray's tuition was more than covered by his academic scholarship. "I wasn't struggling how to pay for it and there were still all of these barriers." He described his advisor as someone who took little interest in his academic pursuits, despite his being in an honor's program. Murray took classes without a strategy for graduating with appropriate course sequences. "Each of these hurdles could be overcome, but they were done in such ignorance. More information about how these things work would have made a big difference."

Murray's family began to support the idea of college more, but made one thing clear:

> Business is the only thing worth taking except for possibly engineering… and that's what I did. I got my degree and worked—and got the magic job offer from the factory to be in a white-collar role, which no one in my family had ever imagined … and I turned it down.

Throughout his time in college Murray has developed a love of learning, reading, and English, something he shared he likely would have realized four years earlier if he had not been a first-generation college student and pressured to explore practical education routes. He had joined a fraternity during college so that he was able to live on campus, and upon graduating and working for a short time in finance, he had the opportunity to again live in the fraternity house in a supervisory role while earning a master's degree in English. Murray jumped at the opportunity despite having to turn down a coveted offer for a white-collar role at the factory that had employed his family for generations. It was his time as a live-in residential advisor for his fraternity that Murray realized a career path in student affairs as an option. "I became close with various student affairs professionals and at some point asked one of them, how do you get a job like yours?" When contemplating other potential career paths, Murray described his decision-making process:

> We all tend to gravitate towards areas where we have more success and for me, school work was a place—I always got the straight A's and while I loved sports, I wasn't good enough to play Division I. And much of what I—all of my work through most of undergrad and all of grad school was playing in bands. I played in rock bands and I play guitar and we made a record and so on and that would

> have been a great career. But I—we didn't sell enough records, but school, that was a place that I felt comfortable.

Murray finished his master's degree in English and began applying for positions he found listed in *The Chronicle of Education*. He took a position working with student conduct and fraternity and sorority life at a small liberal arts college. The college was a two-hour' drive from the city where he had spent his entire life. Murray enjoyed the position, and his resiliency skills he had built throughout his high school and college experiences were put to good use as he adapted to a new environment. The campus had its challenges, but the experience reaffirmed his career choice:

> I think that's a real barrier for me per se. I don't know how it applies to others, or first-generation students, because everything—the first time you walk in a country club or you attend a faculty member, you are an absolute fish out of water. I mean, it's hard—I can't claim I felt confident in those roles, but inside I did feel like I was in the right place when I was in the higher ed environment. And it just felt more comfortable to me than the factory or the places where I worked summer jobs or those sorts of things.

Murray's identity became connected with higher education and he thrived at the private liberal arts college where he would spend most of his career. He recalled early in his career another young professional and he were asked which one of them was going to become a college president first. Despite neither of them understanding what that meant, his peer left to pursue a doctorate and Murray continued to quickly ascend at his institution. He was promoted a couple of times, and by the age of 31 Murray was serving as the dean of students, supervising many directors older than he. Recognizing the trend

of senior administrators requiring doctorates, Murray decided to leave his institution to pursue his doctorate in student affairs and higher education, something that would complement his bachelor's in business, master's in English, and his current work. Upon sharing his decision with the president, the president made concessions for Murray to stay. They agreed that the university would pay for his doctorate, allowing him the flexibility to complete the degree at another university 100 miles away while continuing to work full time. Murray put his head down and got to work on his degree and career; hard work was engrained in him and was something he enjoyed.

After a presidential transition, many senior administrators were eliminated, but the president valued hard workers and Murray's role was not in jeopardy. The new president's work ethic was so high that he sought to hire a staff member who could assist him with executive-level tasks and asked Murray to help him brainstorm a list of alumni and other individuals who may be great candidates for the position. Murray created a list and presented it to the president, who asked why he had not included himself on the list. Enjoying his current role, Murray shared he did not see himself in the role, to which the president responded, "I think you could be a college president and this move could help you on that path." And so it was settled, Murray became the secretary of the college, which he equated to a chief of staff role. However, it took Murray a number of years to believe and accept the president's view of him and his career potential. "All it took was one person saying I think you have what it takes for this and he was somebody I really respected… PhD from Princeton and he has all the credentials and all of this stuff."

Murray's career transition allowed him to continue to supervise the student affairs division but also gave him experience with athletics, public affairs, and strategic

planning, areas of great interest to him. In addition, Murray got to stand in for the president on many internal and external meetings. He had the opportunity to take lead in strategic planning, working closely with faculty. Murray described finishing his degree while battling insecurity:

> I completed the doctorate and still did not necessarily see myself as being desirable as a college president because I came from student affairs and I went to a public access university. And that—this higher ed world, particularly private, more elite—you know, top 100 liberal arts colleges, there's a lot of snobbery around the idea of credential. And I have to say, this, I guess, is the confident part, I never felt that they were smarter than I was, but they had more advantages in one way or another.

Despite earning his doctorate, Murray's work was not done at the institution. His university struggled financially and after much turnover of the role of chief financial officer, Murray was asked to take on the role on an interim basis while a search was done for the position. Using his business degree, work in finance, and his intuition, Murray agreed and despite his learning curve, he excelled in the role. He was so successful that after doing multiple interim stints, the president asked him to become the permanent vice president for finance. Murray was never one to turn down an opportunity or adventure, so he accepted and set out to turn the college's finances around. He approached his new role in an unconventional way, driven by his values:

> I've always been very devoted to the idea of shared governance—in my church, in fraternal organizations, college, whatever it might be. That's why I feel so at home in higher ed. And so I just brought those systems to the finance area and the

> college community responded incredibly well. It's all based on faith and people that if we're transparent—we're open with all of the information and they see it all—that collectively, we'll put self-interest aside for the good of the whole. There are always some people who are jerks about it, but they are by far the minority. We'll make better decisions together and it worked. And the college's financial circumstances turned around dramatically from deficits to big surpluses, and faculty/staff salaries went from the 10th percentile in comparison group to the median and on and on.

As the college's financial status improved, Murray's portfolio grew. Another new president had taken over and did not enjoy or have expertise in many areas, and he again expanded Murray's responsibilities. He promoted Murray to executive vice president, and Murray oversaw admissions, development, student affairs, athletics, public affairs, and related offices. Murray ran senior staff meetings for the college and was, in many aspects, the de facto president. He regularly managed conflicts and made decisions for the institution. Despite his successes, Murray still did not feel prepared for a presidency nor did he desire to have his supervisor's role, despite others' beliefs:

> Because he was less engaged, a lot of people were going to the board. They asked that I be made president and so on, and I didn't want anything to do with any of this. I remained and still remain very loyal to him. And so my goal is helping him to be successful. He's still there and he's been successful and we're good friends.

Search firms had been contacting Murray about president roles for years at this point, but finally after six years in the executive vice president role, 27 years at the institution, and allowing his children to finish college, Murray was ready to explore the

opportunity. The year prior to his departure, Murray explored an opportunity despite it not being a good fit. “It was that experience, which was a failure—but it was that experienced where I realized, oh I can hold my own in these conversations about higher ed.” Murray was one of two finalists for the role, but the other candidate was selected. “I felt wonderful about it. I hadn’t expected to get that far and thought, this has me pretty intrigued about being a president.” The following year with an empty nest at home, Murray did a full search, applied to seven or eight institutions, and received multiple offers. He was often the only finalist at each institution without a background in academic affairs, but his financial experience became one of his most attractive features as a presidential candidate. Murray chose his current institution—small, private, liberal arts institution in a mid-sized Midwestern city—because it “felt right” and he felt that he could see himself there. Although his breadth of experiences was impressive, Murray’s EdD instead of a PhD impacted his search process:

> When I entered the pool for presidencies, the EdD was a huge drawback. I was shocked by it, how much time I had to spend explaining it… if I had somebody to advise me or mentor me, it would have taken probably a tiny flip for me to pursue the PhD instead.

Murray felt the impact of his first-generation and low-income identities in the presidential search process. He relied on his own past experiences to navigate the challenges:

> When I pledged the fraternity, you had a little pledge manual and it had a section on etiquette in it that could have been written in 1955. I had never run across any of this stuff, even the what to wear or how to handle yourself at a rush party or a

> cocktail party or anything like that. So, those things presidents are expected—presidential candidates are expected to have those skills. And the time at my previous institution had offered me the chance to try a lot of these things, but I was in my 30s before I was ever on an airplane, 30 or 31 years old. My family didn't have any money, we didn't—I was never outside of the state until I was a pre-teen. And so that—I don't mean to sound like it's an underprivileged kind of thing at all. It's just it's a different segment of society and it—and things that a lot of people take for granted, you just get experience with those things and, again, I think this is mostly a question of wealth rather than any other factor. But the—that has been a challenge on the path to the presidency.

Adjusting to his life as a president also brought about interesting challenges as Murray sought to reconcile his new role with his collective identities:

> I don't feel entitled to any of the things that go with the presidency and I've had to get used to people calling me President Murray, those kinds of things. I don't ask—on campus, I ask to be called Andy and—but, you know, I'll speak at a community event or whatever it might be where people call me by that title and it— My job has a country club membership, that's not something that would have been on my radar. And so—and we have events there and entertain and meet donors there and that sort of thing. I still haven't been able to bring myself to use it for personal use.

Despite the identity challenges and adjustments, it is his first-generation experience and modest upbringing that Murray identifies as helping him remain humble, keep priorities and values intact, and succeed as the president at his current institution:

> There's a lot of snobbery in higher ed… There's a lot of weight placed on credentials, on publications, on some things that aren't necessarily—they may correspond to excellence in teaching and learning and fulfillment of our mission or they may not. They don't necessarily do that. So that—you have to have just an unceasing devotion to the student experience and part of why I felt at home here right away is we do not have a wealthy student body. Our average—well I don't know the percentage of first-gen. Our average family income is well below the public flagship here, so our students are not well-heeled, but the quality of education in the program is first-rate. That happens for them in the classroom and beyond. And so, we just have to keep our focus on that all the time and I think that's how my background influences how I approach the work because I do see a fair amount among peers of concern for pecking order, lack of student-centeredness, and where the greater concern is, how do we stack up versus this other college down the road instead of what's really happening for our students. And when you come from less privilege and less sense of entitlement, it's easier to remember that as you are doing the work.

In addition to coming at his role from a person-centered and values-driven approach, Murray sets key priorities of his institution the same way. He has goals as president to further diversity the student body. Murray's definition of diversity goes beyond academic and theoretical perspectives on race. As he states:

> The lived experience was a more powerful narrative than the national zeitgeist around race or the academic one where we have a very high level of devotion to

> principles of diversity as defined through our intellect, but not a lot—a level of lived comfort.

Murray credits his high school experience as the main catalyst in his own understanding of diversity:

> When almost everyone you know is African American—outside of your family—then all the best people you know are African American. So all the smartest kids in my school were African American, the best athletes, the best singers, most community service–oriented, all of the rest. … Those were all the warmest, most caring, mentoring people I knew, and so in that way my educational background has made me want to make this place more like that.

Murray recognizes there are systemic hurdles impacting his desire to focus on issues of diversity and inclusion, which his own lived experience helps him have greater awareness of:

> All of our students have these same abilities to succeed and the academy often uses other measures to evaluate students' abilities to succeed or faculty or staff ability to succeed. And first-generation students are definitely at a disadvantage in all those regards, so things called—their credentials or standardized test scores or– I was lucky, the standardized test scores sent me to college. If I hadn't had that, I wouldn't have had the scholarship, I wouldn't have gone to college, and certainly never, obviously, become a college president. And I would have been just as smart or just as capable or whatever else as I am now, but it wouldn't have ever happened.

Attending college changed his trajectory and his family's socio-economic status. Despite his success, Murray remains humble and set a realistic goal for his two children:

> We had a goal for both of them to graduate in four years in whatever field interested them with no debt and with a new car, which we saved up and bought for each of them… That's an incredible privilege and fortunately it worked. They both were great kids and they are grateful to have that start and we were able to provide it. But if I hadn't had my own experience ... I would never have known how to accomplish that.

Throughout his career, Murray credits his first-generation identity as a benefit that has helped him build resiliency and overcome many barriers. Despite overcoming many hurdles, Murray continues to struggle to find his place leading a university:

> I would say the first-generation experience made me, as a president, prepared in all sorts of real-world ways that many academics don't get … but less prepared in terms of whether I belong here.

Individual Themes from President Murray

Hard work ethic, perspective-taking, and kindness as resiliency tools. Throughout his career, Murray's work ethic and kindness have kept him grounded. Murray's work ethic was reflected in his answer about how he spends his free time. "We can't find time for that if we're going to do this job the way it ought to be done." His work ethic has been engrained in him and, coupled with kindness and perspective-taking, have provided him the resiliency to persist and succeed:

> For me, kindness is an incredibly important value. Getting things done is also incredibly important … I had all of this success and got promoted just for doing

> my normal job and I think [it's] the first-generation thing where you're expected to be self-reliant … I guess I had a better work ethic and better ability to resolve conflict, to handle difficult situations, to find compromise… I don't like to burn bridges or anything like that, these were hard situations, but I tried to always be kind, I always valued being kind.

In addition to acting from his core values in his professional roles, Murray's ability to maintain perspective about what his life could have been, if not for college, is a constant reminder to appreciate his success. Murray also had to learn how to find joy in his work:

> I had enough food to eat and a roof over my head and my parents loved me and everything I wanted to do I got to do. I have this incredibly privileged life, but not just now that I'm president. I definitely felt that way when I was assistant dean of students. There were people digging ditches whereas I got to go work on springfest … It didn't seem hard to me, the conflict; the difficult, unpleasant, emotional situations; working with families and students. Yeah, it was hard, but it was definitely no harder than what I did at home or in school growing up, and the work—the number of hours expected didn't seem to me to be excessive, it seemed to me to be easier than the summer jobs I'd had. It was easier than factory work or something like that … Finding work that is more pleasurable …as a first-gen I didn't know workplaces had that. I thought workplaces were something you—my parents hated their jobs, they hated their supervisors, hated them, and yet imagine me going on to work for the same company.

Power of suggestion and making the most of opportunities. Murray did not identify specific mentors who guided him throughout his career but did speak of specific questions or suggestions from individuals in power that had a strong influence in his career path. “It took just one person saying a few words. It wasn’t difficult mentoring to make me believe something was possible.” The ability to see what could be possible from the suggestion of others has allowed Murray to be optimistic at each career step and to enjoy engaging in new challenges. Throughout the many positions he held at his former institution, he approached each new challenge with optimism and excitement. It was this open-minded approach that allowed him to advance professionally. Describing his final years at his former institution, Murray stated, “It was a fun place to be and I got a range of experience that very few presidential candidates have.”

Dr. James Scott

I sent Dr. Scott an email invitation to participate in my dissertation study at 8:35PM one evening in late June. He wrote back at 9:09PM stating it sounded like fun and suggested some dates to meet him on his rural campus, less than an hour from where I live in the Southeast. During our e-mail exchange he insisted I call him Jim and reiterated his excitement for our conversation. His office and the main campus of his multiple-location community college was about an hour and fifteen minutes from my home, but he suggested we meet me at their satellite campus, which would save me thirty minutes on my drive. I looked forward to my interview with Jim, but after scheduling it for 9AM on a weekday I immediately regretted the decision—traffic in my city can be exceptionally difficult that time of day.

The day of the interview traffic was surprisingly cooperative, allowing me to get to campus almost a half-hour early. Our interview was on a Wednesday and the day prior was an orientation day for incoming students. Handwritten welcome signs hung above the entrance to the student center building, likely created by gregarious student orientation leaders. The building looked brand new and seemed to be designed to fit into the natural landscape of the area with rolling hills and mountains nearby. I would later learn from Jim that the building and campus were built in their location because it was along the major interstate, and the location made it a hub for partnership and degree offerings with the nearby transportation and logistics industry. The original campus location thirty minutes away was in a smaller town and had fewer opportunities for employment for industry partnerships. After sitting in my car for about 15 minutes catching up on e-mail and enjoying the air-conditioning on a humid summer morning, I walked into the building about ten minutes early. There was a very nice campus bookstore immediately upon entry selling t-shirts, coffee mugs, and other paraphernalia emblazoned with the campus name, something I had not expected to see at a community college. I would later learn from Jim that his son was working in the bookstore for the summer, and I got to meet him at the completion of our interview. He and his father exchanged a couple laughs and discussed the need to switch cars due to appointments later in the day. I walked down the open hallway of the gorgeous building to see the far end was home to a large lounge space with a 30-foot-high wall of windows and a substantial two-sided fireplace clad in rock centered in the space. Just before the fireplace was an energetic man in his early 50s laying out coffee and donuts and he looked directly

at me. With very few people in the building it was clear this was Jim and he immediately identified me as well.

Jim had brought the donuts and coffee for our conversation, recognizing that the campus coffee shop was only open on orientation days during summer months. His attention to detail by remembering the coffee shop hours struck me, because I did not imagine a president worrying about that level of detail. It seemed Jim took interest in every detail of institutional operations. Jim had brought a box of 12 donuts and a full to-go carafe of coffee from the local Dunkin Donuts, fully expecting that other campus staff members could benefit from the morning treats. Jim also brought a coffee mug with the college's logo as a gift for me. He said years from now "I'd value having mementos from my hard work." I appreciated Jim's gifts, and the serene landscape outside the expansive windows was an idyllic setting for our conversation. Jim suggested we talk there beacuse the building was quiet and the morning sun provided ideal light. About halfway through our conversation the building started to get hectic as colleagues came in for what appeared to be a meeting that was to start at 10AM. Jim introduced me to each of them with great excitement for my study and offered everyone coffee and donuts—a clear indicator of the ways in which Jim approached his role as a college president. We moved to a conference room on the second floor of the building for the second half of our interview.

Educational Entrepreneurship and Innovation: President Scott's Story

James Scott gets bored easily. Constantly looking for the next challenge, he never set out to be a college president. However, he is a man who never turns down a new opportunity and enjoys finding creative and innovative ways to improve organizations.

When it came time to consider presidencies, however, it could not be just any institution, especially not an institution that was unwilling to change the way it operated. “I simply cannot fathom why people would want to be the president of a maintenance institution,” he joked. He explained that he wanted to be at a place that could benefit from his creativity and ingenuity. Working somewhere that involved maintaining status quo was of no interest to him.

James Scott is a 52-year old White man who serves as president for a public university that primarily grants two-year associates degrees. The institution is part of a large state university system and has an enrollment of 5400 on multiple campuses in the rural Southeast. The institution has begun offering bachelor’s degree programs, but most students graduate with an associate’s degree and/or transfer into other state institutions to continue their bachelor’s degree. His current role is his first presidency, which he began three years ago. Scott earned his bachelors, masters, and doctorate from three different public universities in the Midwest. Of the 5400 students at Scott’s institution, about 1800, or one-third, are first-generation college students.

Scott grew up in the rural Midwest with working-class parents. Not only was he the first in his family to attend and graduate college but he was the first to finish high school:

> My mom and dad, neither of them graduated from high school. My mom ultimately got a GED and then she became a nurse’s aide; my dad went to work in a trailer factory, like double-wide, and showed some talent as a carpenter and one of the guys said, “You should try to get in with the union as a construction guy.”

> Long story short, he did and he ended up being a superintendent in construction over there.

Despite his father's success as a construction superintendent, like his son, he often got bored and had a passion for putting his creative ideas into action:

> And then one day he came home, and I was in 6th grade, and he said to mom that he was going to freeze his pension and so in essence, retire, but not be able to touch his pension yet. And he started buying out houses of furniture and selling them out of a three-car garage that we built. And I have moved so much furniture in my life, I can pack a truck with the best of them. But the thing about that, the only reason I bring it up to you, is you're listening to these folks explain their backgrounds, I think dad's entrepreneurship—nature or nurture—don't know, but it may have had an effect.

As a student, academics always came easy for Scott, which came with benefits and challenges in a working-class community:

> I was considered gifted in high school and ultimately chose to [graduate high school and] leave for college a year early. Probably, reflecting back, part of the reason I chose to leave for college a year early is when you're gifted and grow up in a town with more cows than humans, you are different.

Scott always knew college would be part of his experience and chose to attend the largest university in his home state. Growing up in a small town, he desired the exact opposite for college. "It's like, which school in the state has the largest student population? I'm going there." Scott's other passion, aside from academics, was basketball. "The only thing I really missed about high school was varsity basketball, so I

promptly spent all of my time playing basketball and came dangerously close to flunking out." After a semester in college at age seventeen, Scott had not done well academically. His parents understood and supported him by sharing that "not everyone is college material." They offered him the opportunity to leave college and come back home. Jim's determination and strong will would not allow that:

> Deep down I knew that it was because of me, it wasn't because of us as a family. They had all the support in the world and they definitely wanted me to be in college, but they had no clue what college was really about. And so I just got to a point where it's like, you know, I could walk away. I mean, they said, "You can go get a job down at the car plant, at the automotive plant, any of them outside of the city." And people were doing it and making a great living. But I knew that I had not really given it my best, and that's when I had to really kind of dig deep and start thinking about things like, maybe I need a tutor.

Returning to college his second semester, Scott was reminded that he was smart for his small hometown, but that "the bar had been raised and the expectations are different and, yeah, you really do need to read your textbooks." Scott's new determination helped him improve his grades during the remainder of his first year of college. It was his sophomore year, however, that he began taking opportunity of all that the university offered and he shifted his priorities by remembering the reason he was at college:

> Sophomore year changed a variety of things for me. The idea of partying wasn't as important. I got a real job—and by that I mean that in my freshman year I did refereeing football, intramural football. I refereed intramural basketball, and I

> umpired intramural softball. And you could pick up as many games as you wanted. But then I moved into residence hall security and then ultimately became a supervisor for maintenance. They're still student employment but real jobs. So that happened and I started to join more organizations … I began to really experience college life at that point. It was a shift in maturity and responsibility … a guy who first trimester had flunked math was now doing impromptu tutoring in my dorm room with some folks from the sister floor who were trying to pass the math class that I had failed the year before but then aced when I got serious about it.

Scott was able to improve his academic performance and collegiate experience greatly and despite his new-found success, he was still at a large public institution with little direct advising, mentoring, or support. He did not grasp the impact of this until senior year drew near. Scott was determined to graduate within four years but was short on credits:

> There is nobody saying to you, in four years you need to have 120 credits and that breaks down to 15 to 16 credits per semester, right? I worked every summer on a vegetable farm, so it wasn't like I was going to be going to school in the summer … But, I get to the summer before I'm—actually the spring before I'm going to graduate and I realize, I'm going to have to take a ton of summer classes just to get out on time, but that's fine.

Scott was able to take summer school before his senior year and still graduate on time. Due to starting college at 17, he was only 20 years old when he finished. He decided that because he started college a year early, a master's degree was a logical step

due to his completion at a young age. His mother had a different view. “No, you’re not, you’re going to get a job” was her response. Being strong-willed, he decided not to change course but to take out loans to cover the cost, which he now describes as “the best investment he ever made.” Deciding on a school to earn his master’s degree came down to two large institutions in the Midwest. Scott convinced his father to take a road trip to look at the two cities and the institutions. On their way back, his father asked Scott which one was his favorite. He chose the one that was “a little grittier, more industrial.” His father responded, “Sounds good to me,” and the next step was determined.

Scott began his master’s degree that fall and secured a role in the career planning and placement office at the institution. He enjoyed helping students navigate their career choices and had many experiences that opened his eyes in the role:

> It was eye-opening for me because being a mainstream student, you don’t often think about students who might have a mental issue, sex and gender, you know. Historically, our colleges have been built around the male/female thing. And so—you know, if you come and you’re gay, you’re like, well how do I fit? Where am I? Where do I fit in this? And that was a real eye-opener for me. It was really good for me to see students that weren’t loving every second of their higher education experience.

Upon finishing his master’s degree and with his career placement experience, Scott moved back to his home state and began a human resources position focused on helping displaced auto industry employees find new work. Scott’s teaching career happened without any planning from Scott:

> I'm working in manufacturing and one day I get a phone call from a guy, and he says, "Mr. Scott, we've never met, but I hear that you have a master's … and you work in HR, right?" I said yeah. He said, "Okay, I learned about you through the local HR association and I was wondering, would you ever be interested in teaching a class?" I said, "Sure ... when does the class start?" He said, "Tonight." And I said, "Alright, I'll be over at lunch … I'll get the syllabus. I hope you're not expecting too much of me for the first night, but we'll get something put together." So I walk into the class and I'm the youngest person in the class and we had a great time. We just had a ball … I mean, Peter, I came home the first night I taught, I couldn't sleep until 3:00 in the morning because I was so full of adrenaline because I had found my niche.

Scott was quickly asked to take on additional classes at the private university. Soon thereafter another opportunity presented itself when a colleague came by his classroom as he was finishing teaching one evening:

> And then another guy, a vice president showed up and said,"Hey, some folks have been talking about you. I'm starting this new program … adult accelerated career education, it's a program for non-traditional students. It will be accelerated coursework and we've got some ideas about how we might want to run this thing, but we need somebody to run it for us. Would you be interested?" And I said, "Might be." And I actually had to take a cut in pay … I knew what I wanted and it just felt so good. So you know at that point I was like, you know, I can take a $2000 or $3000 cut for this, just to be doing what I really wanted to do.

The program had great success under Scott's direction and he was quickly asked to move over to the traditional program at the institution, and "the next thing you know, I was the academic dean, and that happened in four years." Throughout his career progress, Scott had begun a doctoral program at a public university nearby. He was eager to complete his doctorate and began his own company, allowing more flexibility. One popular focus area for Scott's company was helping colleges and universities move from lecture format to facilitated learning. He also secured contracts with local counties to train managers and supervisors, and a community college in the state asked him to be on retainer for managerial consulting and coursework. Despite loving the flexibility of his own consulting firm, Scott missed seeing his ideas and suggestions come to fruition and was "missing the opportunity to be a leader again. So I was starting to kind of have the itch to get back into education leadership."

When colleagues at a state institution suggested he apply for a vice chancellor and dean role, he jumped at the opportunity and was hired to oversee professional and technological studies—an area of the institution that was designed to be able to respond to market needs in the Midwestern city in which it was situated. The position allowed Scott's creativity, ingenuity, and entrepreneurial spirit to flourish and he created numerous departments, offices, units, and an academic incubator, "which was the think tank that did the research on next-generation careers to start new degree programs." Scott connected with the values and goal of the institution as it was a place that "changes family trees" and allowed future generations to have educational and career opportunities not available to their parents or grandparents. Scott noted he was careful when using that analogy among audiences because, "you know, there might be a grandpa or grandma or

even a mom or dad that says, what's wrong with our family tree?" Scott also had the opportunity to restart international programs at the institution after they had been cut five years prior, and within a short period of time had grown the program substantially. The institution had 1000 international students by the time he left the university.

Despite his success and autonomy in the position, Scott again got bored. He began thinking about his next opportunity:

> So what happens? You build new units in your division and you are really entrepreneurial for a long time. And probably deep down inside, at some point you say, I want to run the whole show, you know? For me, I justified it to myself this way … I was bored because the 10th unit was no more exciting to create than the 9th because it kind of becomes formulaic. Even though you're working with different technology or whatever. And so I just said, I want something different.

With his wife's blessing to seek positions close to family or "somewhere warm," Scott began searching for an institution that would allow him to turn a struggling institution around, and when he found his current role it checked all the boxes. He applied at the community college outside of a major city in the Southeast, and "lo and behold, they were foolish enough to hire me." Scott never imagined himself being a college president, but with his habit of getting bored and looking for new challenges, a college presidency was a natural next step. He reflected on an early job in industry when a boss once told him he would be a president, and Scott was taken aback by the comment. "Looking back on it now, maybe she saw something that I cannot recognize in myself."

Scott's position also includes a teaching appointment as an associate professor of business. He attempts to teach one course a year in addition to his duties as president,

because he values his time in the classroom. It gives him unique insight into students' experiences. He also appreciates that he gets to have direct interaction with faculty on a regular basis—something he feels he would not have the opportunity to do if he were at a larger institution or a flagship university. He enjoys that he can have casual brainstorming opportunities with his faculty but recognizes and respects that they have the autonomy to make their own decisions:

> When I got here, I talked to the business faculty. We were chatting and they said they'd love to have a bachelor's degree in business. And I said, "Great, what are you thinking?" And they said, "Well, we've got this idea and this idea and this idea." And I said, "Have you thought about logistics and supply chain management?" No. So then they went and did some homework on it, but they had thought about healthcare management, which is a slam dunk. [Our main campus location] has three different healthcare organizations based there. It's a small medical Mecca … We've got a major interstate running through here, there are warehouses everywhere. This is logistics central. And now we have those two bachelor's degrees … I understand I do not own the curriculum, the faculty owns the curriculum and I want to make that very, very clear to them. So I will suggest, and if they tell me "go pound the sand," I go pound the sand. I'm cool with that. There are plenty of other things to keep me busy.

Scott looks forward to the day where he can be even more entrepreneurial with his current institution, but his primary focus has been "pulling the institution out of a financial ditch. It doesn't really give you a lot of opportunity to go out and do audacious, entrepreneurial things." Scott recognizes the bureaucracy and low-risk-taking propensity

of the state system he is a part of at his institution but values that, in comparison to previous employers, he does not have to deal with the politics associated with unions and other hurdles that can come with college presidencies. He is putting his head down and focusing on the financials but, ever-competitive in nature, he is constantly looking for ways that his institution can offer cutting-edge programs and attract students that might not normally consider the school. Describing his competitive side, Scott noted, "You ask the guys when we play basketball, they say when Jim plays with us, the intensity goes up for everybody because I don't want to lose."

Individual Themes from President Scott

Humility and perspective as resiliency tools. Despite his competitive nature and his constant drive to succeed, Scott never forgets his roots. "I'm still the kid that grew up in the town that didn't have any red lights and had more cows than humans. And I truly feel that way. I am so blessed to be able to do what I do." Never forgetting where he came from, and not shying from hard work, Scott is always able to keep perspective. This ability helps him persevere, because he recognizes he could easily have been in a working-class lifestyle as a farmer. Scott's humility and perspective serve as his key values for the ways in which he approaches his role as president:

> I think that might be one of the things that at least sets me apart from some presidents is that I never think that I'm the boss. I'm just here to serve and try to organize us in such a way that we can make for a very successful institution that serves students. And I don't know if that's the way you're raised or if that's first-generation or whatever, but I don't feel that in any way I deserve this.

Creativity and ingenuity. Scott bores easily. This theme has been persistent throughout his life and has pushed him to heights he never imagined in his career. He loves to explore and "understand the unknown" from a competitive vantage point. Scott looks at what currently is and constantly asks what could be—a trait he likely picked up from his blue-collar father, who was not afraid to step away from his steady job to start his own furniture business. Although Scott did not discuss his future career plans, once he gets the institution turned around financially and is able to create some innovative programs, I imagine he may get bored again and will tackle a new adventure with the same creativity and ingenuity.

Dr. Samuel Ideye

I was traveling to a major metropolitan city in the Northeast for a friend's wedding in late July and sent out requests to every first-generation college president I could find in the area. Few responded, but I was excited when Dr. Ideye did and offered to meet at my convenience while I was in town. Dr. Ideye is the president of a large urban community college. He was born and raised in Nigeria, so I was excited for the unique perspective he would lend to the research. The heat index was above 95 degrees Fahrenheit in the city on the day I travelled to Dr. Ideye's campus from my friend's apartment just a couple miles away. In addition, my friend's air-conditioning was working the way most window-unit air conditioners work in the city—barely. Despite the heat, I managed to change into dress slacks and a button-down shirt for our meeting. For this interview, however, a sockless loafer look would have to suffice, because it was my only fashion option for surviving the heat. My Uber driver took a creative route to campus and had to drop me off at the bottom of a hill to avoid one-way streets. Hot and

disgruntled, I got to the campus entrance on top of the sizeable hill and the security guard stepped out of her booth, looked at me, grinned, and said, “You lost?” I recognized her Dominican accent and inflection, and the smirk on her face made me feel instantly welcomed despite the heat and my lack of familiarity with the campus. The student population at the institution was just 2% White, and from my interactions on campus I imagine the staff demographics were similar—I guess you could say I stood out. She directed me to the building I was heading to and as I walked across campus, I began to acknowledge that my preconceptions of what this campus might look like due to its location, endowment, and demographics were wildly inaccurate. I imagined large cement buildings on busy streets, lack of community, and people hurrying to their next location. I was surprised to see a traditional quadrangle-type campus with the gorgeous classical architecture of prestigious campuses. At the edges of the quadrangle were old mansions that had been repurposed as offices. The landscaping and upkeep was not as ornate as nearby Ivy League institutions, but the layout and feel of the campus were just as inviting. There were strong signs of community on campus—students were engaging with one another while casually walking around the quad. I later learned the campus was the original location of a prestigious private university that relocated to a more upscale neighborhood decades ago.

I walked around the quad to the building where the president’s office was, and I arrived a half-hour early so that I could find a cool hallway or lobby to sit in and cool off. Having not done my homework on the institution’s history or architecture, I realized that many buildings are on a historic register and cannot be altered. I had not factored into my plan that air-conditioning would only be window units inside actual offices. I decided to

head directly to the president's suite, despite being 30 minutes early, to seek refuge from the heat. When I shared my name with the receptionist, she looked puzzled, to which I replied that I was aware I was very early but happy to sit in the well-chilled waiting area inside the suite. She smiled and nodded, and I sat. The waiting area had gorgeous architecture complete with ornate crown molding and large old windows. Oversized office furniture that divided the space into separate work areas for support staff covered much of the room's charm. After waiting for about 15 minutes another staff member came out from a doorway and said the president was ready to see me. I walked down a very long hallway, which had clearly been retrofitted for multiple offices without altering the original structure, and walked into a gorgeous and expansive office with a massive and ornate antique desk. President Ideye's office was stately and felt like a movie-set version of an Ivy League president's office. His historic desk sat in the corner in front of windows, and he and I sat at the end of a long conference table that likely sat 18–20 people. He is a small man in stature, with a warm demeanor. He was excited to talk with me and shook my hand with a large smile on his face.

Humility in Action: President Ideye's Story

Ideye is small in stature and smaller in ego. Relationships and connections with his university community are top priority for him, and he never forgets his humble beginnings growing up poor in Nigeria. Despite his success and the multiple obstacles he has overcome, he has little interest in his title of president:

> It is only a title. You've got to have that humility. You've got to have that human touch. I am very simple, I'm very low key, and I'm very humble. And you may not like what I tell you, but I'll always tell you the truth … even as a vice

> president, as a president, I interacted with faculty, kidded around with faculty, talked to the students. Even as president, I was very open … I think it's my upbringing. It's just a title … It doesn't mean anything if you can't relate to people, if you can't come down to the level … See, that's my same attitude here. The president is just a title, you've got to be human.

Putting humans above titles has served Ideye well and helped him remain humble while advancing his career. His story is a rags-to-riches one that personifies the American dream.

Samuel Ideye is a 62-year old Black man and Nigerian immigrant who serves as president for a public community college in a large city in the Northeast. His institution enrolls 11,500 students, and 98% of the students are students of color. Ideye is in his second presidency, first becoming president at age 54 of another community college. He earned his undergraduate degree at a public university in Nigeria and his master's and doctorate from the same public state university in the Midwest. Nearly 60% of students at Ideye's institution are first-generation college students.

Born and raised in Nigeria, Ideye's mother never went to school and could barely speak English. His father attended secondary school and enrolled in the military but did not attend college. It was his father's military service that led to his family placing high value on education and college in particular. As Ideye explained:

> [The military] was like a transformation for him because he saw the power and transformation of education. So, when he had his kids, the emphasis from day one to everybody, to all 11 of us, we are all college graduates. And so even though we were poor, he made sure that we all went to boarding high schools, me in

> particular as the first son. [He] made sure that I went to Catholic boarding school and he emphasized to me, you've got to study, you've got to study, you've got to go to school, you've got to go to school.

Ideye was young when he went to boarding school, and he underestimated his father's view on the role education could play in his life. His father's vision would eventually become reality for Ideye, however:

> He used to tell me that you're going to meet with kings and queens if you get a good education, which is a fact for me now … I've met people and the presidents and other presidents and prime ministers, but what has opened that door for me, it's education.

After doing well in boarding school, where his life and academics were regimented, Ideye went on to get a college degree at a very competitive university in Nigeria. His challenging Catholic boarding school prepared him well academically. Growing up in Nigeria, Ideye was encouraged to consider two potential careers—a lawyer or a doctor. Teaching is also revered in Nigeria, but Ideye's father had been a medical assistant in the military and particularly desired for Ideye, his oldest son, to be a doctor. Ideye did not object to his father's aspiration for him, "So, my undergraduate degree is in biology, not because I was necessarily interested in biology, but to satisfy his opinion that mattered, and he was paying the bill." Getting into university in Nigeria was an accomplishment in itself, "if you got in … you were basically treated like royalty because very few people got in and the emphasis was, they only let people who wanted to be successful." Although getting into university was an accomplishment, it did not mean

Ideye was prepared for the freedoms of college. Without structure, parents, or boarding school faculty to assist him, Ideye struggled:

> The reverent were not there to tell me when to go to class, when to do this. My first year I really struggled. I almost dropped out, in fact … not because I wasn't smart but because I got freedom and time on my hands that I didn't basically understand.

Ideye's lack of structure, time management, and self-discipline resulted in bad grades his first year. Most were good enough just to pass, but he failed math. Ideye's father had borrowed money to send him to school and did not respond well to his son's poor performance:

> He was livid, I could remember him screaming that you are going to bring a disgrace to our family, you're going to blah, blah, blah … You're the first in our house to go to college, look at the grades that you're bringing home! What's the problem with you?

Ideye felt a strong sense of shame from his performance and spent the summer taking supplementary exams, which in Nigeria were his only other chance—if he failed those he was done with college. Ideye passed and used his father's pressure as a source of motivation and self-discipline. "All of the sudden, I think I realized that I can do it. I just needed to apply myself." It took Ideye the rest of his college experience to turn his grade point average around, but he did much better in his final years of college and was determined to graduate in four years, despite his rough start.

Upon completion of college in Nigeria, all students are required to do one year of service, and Ideye was excited when he was placed in a high school in the northwest part

of Nigeria to teach biology. “My father particularly wanted me to be a doctor, but I always saw myself as a teacher, because I love people, love to talk, I love to meet people. See I always fantasized about teaching.” Ideye had a great year teaching in the region that was very different from where he grew up and was comprised of different ethnic groups. “It was a challenging and really fun year for me.” After his year of service, Ideye returned to his home state in Nigeria and taught biology at a school that he compared to his current institution. Students who were unable to succeed in traditional schools could come there to prepare for national educational exams that were required of all students. Ideye relished in his teaching appointment:

> I enjoyed it because primarily I saw myself as a teacher. I love working with students. In my mind, administration was the farthest thing from my route. I always saw myself as somebody that wanted to teach. I love when you can explain things to people, when the lightbulb goes over their head, when they can learn … to me, teaching is like a therapy.

Although Ideye enjoyed his teaching role, his institution offered the opportunity to continue his education by offering a sabbatical to pursue a master’s degree in Britain or the United States. Based on his passions, Ideye decided to go to the United States, determined to return to Nigeria on completion of his degree and continue teaching:

> I love teaching and I love science, so I wanted to be involved in the preparation of science teachers. So that’s—my goal in life was to go back and get a higher ed degree to be involved in the preparation of teachers that would teach science, especially at the middle school and elementary levels.

Ideye had little interest in large cities when researching universities to attend and found a program at a large public university in a small city in the Midwest whose curriculum was attractive to him. He described his experience there as "the best time of my life I've ever had." Ideye lauded the personal attention he received from the international student office, picking him up at the airport and working to pair students with roommates from their home countries. Ideye also had great affinity for his program director. "[He was] the most wonderful guy I've ever met." Ideye did well his first semester in his master's program and went to his advisor's office to see if there was any way he could get more involved with the department and perhaps find a job there. Ever willing to put in hard work and not needing a glamorous role, Ideye landed himself a unique position that would fund his master's degree—one he was extremely thankful for:

> They have a photographic lab… [hH said,] "The guy who is supposed to run the lab for us quit. Do you want to work in the lab?" I said, "Sure." He said, "Have you developed photographs before?" I said, "Hell no, I have no clue." But I said to him, "If you show me … all I need you to do is to show me once. If you show me what to do and be patient with me asking you questions, I'll take it, I'll do it." … He showed me the developer, the fades, the rinser, the easels… He said, "Well, we can never get anybody to work in the lab. It's a dirty job. You've got to clean the lab, you've got to mix the chemicals, you've got to do this." I said, "I'll do it … I live five minutes away from campus, I don't need to drive here. If people call me at all times, I will come and do it." He said, "Are you sure?" I said, "Sure." They gave me the job, it came with an assistantship. It was like I died and went to

> heaven. I mean, you get reduced tuition, you get $150 every month as a paycheck ... and to make things fanciful for me, I got an office by the darkrooms.

Ideye did his coursework very quickly and earned a near-perfect grade point average. As he was getting close to completing the program, his program director inquired about Ideye's plans to go back to Nigeria. Ideye reiterated with excitement his plan to return to his home country. His program director asked if he had an interest in the PhD program. His director was confident Ideye could secure a graduate fellowship due to his solid academic performance and strong work ethic. Ideye appreciated the support of his program director but desired to return home. "But the more I thought about it, the more I looked at it, he said to me, 'We're going to give you something for almost free, you don't want to do it?'" Ideye warmed up to the idea. He talked with the department chair in secondary education and after taking his GRE and a few additional prerequisites. "The rest is history." Ideye had secured a spot in the PhD program at the institution, a decision that would change his personal and professional life:

> You know, sometimes the best laid plans never come to fruition… So I got a call in the spring of 1982 from the international office, because I'm listed there as volunteer that will work with students that come in. Said there is a young lady coming from Nigeria that needs to be picked up from the airport … Drove to pick up this girl, never knew I was going to meet my wife. So, I picked up this smart lady from the airport, gave her my phone number. I said, "If you need help, call me." … The next day she called me and said, "I can't eat the food in the dorm." I said, "You've got to learn how to eat the food in the dorm, but you can come to

> my apartment and I have Nigerian food if you want to eat." She came and she never left and we've been married for 32 years.

The warmness and kindness in which Ideye described meeting his wife at the airport that day made it clear he had met his soulmate and life partner—someone who would help him navigate future steps and whom he was happy to factor into life decisions. They were married and within three years had a child, which made heading back to Nigeria no longer an option for Ideye. Despite teaching multiple courses, Ideye had not yet considered his next steps after his PhD. He had a classmate from high school in Nigeria that was living in the Northeast and offered for Ideye, his wife, and their daughter to come stay with him while he searched for a position:

> And you know one of the things about immigrants, even if you live in a one-bedroom, as an immigrant, every immigrant that comes here, you'll take them. So this guy literally—we lived in a one-bedroom—took my wife, took my daughter, and we stayed with him for about six months.

Despite the challenges of work visas and immigration policies, Ideye landed his first position at an institution adjacent to a large city in the Northeast as an instructional resources coordinator. "I had no clue what the job entails or what it meant, but all I knew was that I wanted a job and it was from the office of academic affairs, so I applied." The position would entail helping the vice president for academic affairs and running labs. Recounting his interview process, Ideye stated the main question during his interview was, "Can you do anything the vice president needs?" Always willing to take on any task and assist others, Ideye said, "Sure." The immigration process was simpler at the time, but Ideye was confident he would not get the position due to his immigrant status:

> I didn't think they were going to hire me. They didn't even ask me for my papers, but they hired me. It was when I went to go fill out the documentation, I told them, I said, "I'm glad you guys hired me. I have a one-year work permit, but I also need you to file for me for the H1-B1," which they agreed to do.

Ideye quickly learned the position was not challenging or fulfilling. He worked for a year, but missed teaching. "I was saying to myself, this is not what I really wanted as a PhD." Ideye had found a position listed in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* that excited him at a small state school in the rural Southeast. The position included directing the academic center at the university, which brought together tutoring with a writing and a computer-assisted instructional lab. He would also manage the implementation of a Title III grant. With a background in curriculum and instruction, the position was a great fit for Ideye, but his colleagues discouraged him from applying. "They will never hire you… the South is racist, blah, blah, blah." Ideye realized there may be truth to his colleague's perspective, but like all things in life, he figured he had to give it a shot. He applied for the job and heard nothing for a long period of time, but eventually got a call and went for the interview. "I went there with an attitude that I have nothing to lose." Ideye received the details of the Title III grant in advance of the interview, and he read it in detail to plan a presentation on it. "One of the things I'm good at, I pay attention to details and I like the big picture." He used those skills to review the grant and create a strong presentation that won over the hiring team. Ideye was offered the position on the way to the airport immediately following the interview.

Ideye's wife was supportive of the relocation and his new role. Her opinion was of top concern because of Ideye's strong family values. Ideye quickly got to work. He

"put the whole of the tutoring lab in place, implemented the Title III grant … developed foreign language lab, writing lab, math lab. I mean … it was a big enterprise." Ideye was doing well in the role for three years when the institution posted a position for director of freshman programs overseeing orientation, freshman seminar, and related operations. "I get bored easily." His colleague asked, "You sure you want the job?" Ideye responded with his classic reply, "Sure!" Ideye enjoyed the position, did well, and soon became director of interdisciplinary studies after organizational changes. "They knew that if you asked me to do something, I will get it done. … The vice chancellor told me there are things that needed to be fixed. They got fixed." Ideye earned great trust and respect at the institution, but when a new provost arrived and passed him over for a promotion to associate provost, Ideye began to look externally for his next step. When asked by a supervisor why he was leaving, Ideye responded, "I don't see myself being the director of interdisciplinary studies until I die. I think I can do some more." Ideye had landed a position at a small community college in the Northeast as the associate dean of academic affairs. Despite colleagues questioning his decision to leave a four-year institution for a two-year community college, Ideye knew he had to "take his chances." Yet again he had secured the job offer before boarding his plane back home.

In his new role, Ideye was the third in command at the small campus behind the president and dean of academic affairs. He was nostalgic and appreciative when he reflected on the supervisors who hired him. Multiple times Ideye reiterated his appreciation for those individuals and the institution. "I'm telling you these stories because they really opened the pathway to me." From the first day on the job, Ideye's supervisor made his intentions for Ideye's future clear to him:

> He kept telling me you're going to be a president someday … I kept saying to him, I don't want to be a president. I love working with faculty, I love working with students, I love curriculum issues. He said you can do more than that.

As he had done in each role, Ideye approached all aspects of his role with great attention to detail, care, and concern. In one instance, Ideye managed the response to a fire alarm when the president and dean were away. When the president returned he publicly lauded Ideye's efforts. Ideye's response exemplified his approach to any project he takes on. "I kept saying to him, no, I just did what needed to be done."

Two years after arriving on the campus, Ideye took part in the Kellogg Fellowship Program, designed to prepare Hispanic and African American managers for executive positions in community colleges. He was reluctant to take part in the program but agreed after his supervisor continually encouraged it and offered financial support for the program. The program opened Ideye's eyes to the role of executive leadership and presidential roles in community colleges and gave him the confidence he needed to see himself in the role, "then I just said to myself, yes, I can do this." Ideye valued the leadership his supervisors at his new institution saw in him. He articulated it in sharp contrast to the institutional leaders at his previous institution, where he was seen only as a manager and fixer. Although his community college experience was going well, the president eventually retired. The new president started one of his conversations with Ideye inquiring about the need for an associate dean position. It was time to start looking for the next challenge. Ideye left the college shortly thereafter for a position at another community college in the Northeast, this time as vice president for academic affairs and student services. Yet again his president saw great leadership potential in Ideye and said:

> Give me five years as a VP and I'll mentor you to become a president. I said to him… "I want to take one step at a time. let me be your VP first." He said, "Well, but I don't want you to be my VP for life, and you need to go run your own campus someday."… And he kept his promise. As the VP for academic affairs and student services, he involved me in everything.

The president continued his support and investment in Ideye's success by sending him to the Executive Leadership Institute (ELI) and, consistent with his previous supervisors, Ideye shared that he was "one of the best guys I've ever worked with." When his president himself got bored and left for an institution that would give him more challenge, Ideye was a natural for the interim president role. However, there was a clause in the contract for the interim position that would not allow him to be a candidate for the position. Confident in his career trajectory at that point, the clause didn't deter Ideye. "I said to them, I know I can always get a job, so I would do the interim." After the search was complete and three finalists had been on campus, the search committee changed course:

> So on the night the board was supposed to make a decision in hiring one of the three candidates, I got a phone call to my house that the board decided that they're scrapping the search, that we're going to make [me] the president—the permanent president. That's my story.

Ideye's willingness to jump at an opportunity that presented itself combined with years of hard work had paid off in dividends. He thrived in his role as president and after 13 years at the institution, six as vice president for academic affairs and student services and seven as president, he was beginning to consider an additional challenge. He had

increased enrollment at the school from 500 to 5000, and around 2010, he got a call from a search consultant encouraging him to apply for a job in a big city in the Northeast running a community college of over 11,000:

> She called me and said take a look at a job here. I said hell no … [it was] the last place I thought I would ever take a job. I mean … I want to visit but I hate the city. … If you see the places I've lived … small towns … I appreciate the compliment but I don't want it.

Ideye had been to the institution three years prior on an accreditation team so he was familiar with the issues and challenges on the campus. He consulted the person who has been most important in his career decisions, his wife. "My wife said, you've been complaining that you want to do something different before you get too [old] … why don't you look at it?" So at the suggestion of his wife and the search consultant he respected, he begrudgingly updated his materials and applied for the position. A year prior, however, Ideye had been given a six-year contract by the board at his current institution. In that process, the board chair made it clear to Ideye that they were willing to do whatever they could to retain him as president until his retirement. He was offered an increase in salary during his contract renewal, which he turned down, reiterating that his position and contract were never about financial gain. Ideye advanced quickly in the search and was selected as a finalist, resulting in the need to share his status with his board. He recalled thinking, "maybe I should withdraw because on the campus people love me, the community people love me. It appears as if I'm a traitor going to leave, they just gave me a contract through 2020." Again his board offered additional salary to retain Ideye:

> People were calling me, do you want more money? I kept saying,"Iit's not a question of money." And then I had to come out in the open and say to them, "I'm 60 years old. If I want some challenges, this place here has a lot of challenges. I need to do something that is more challenging in my last—this is my last job I'm going to take, so this is the primary reason why I'm applying. Your institution is great, but I need to try my hands in something different. The only reason I took this job is this is just a new challenge. And really, it's a lot of challenge."

Despite his loyalty to his institution, the allure of a new challenge won. But Ideye was unsure of how the search would fare because each of the three finalists for the role were sitting presidents, one with deep roots and a strong reputation in the state. Like each time before, Ideye's strong work ethic, considerate and diplomatic demeanor, and preparedness for new challenges worked to his advantage. He was selected and began his second college presidency.

Although his second presidency is at a larger campus, Ideye's commitment to individual student attention, prioritizing student needs, and remaining humble continue to guide his approach. His lack of ego is reflected in his hiring practices as well. "I always try to hire people that are smarter and better than me. I don't have an ego, that's one of the things about me." He asks students to call him Samuel, not Dr. Ideye or President Ideye. "And students here, they know me. When I take a walk on campus, they know me." Students also drive Ideye's priorities:

> From day one I said [my] number one, number two, and number three priorities are our students. Every decision that we make—how does this benefit the

> students? How does this relate to students? How does this advance our mission? … Everything we do—got to be the focus for our students.

Working at community colleges was never Ideye's goal, but they have been a perfect fit for his career and approach to education. He described community colleges as places where he "has really blossomed." Ideye doesn't lament over why he would not have become a provost at the four-year state school where he worked. Instead he followed his priorities and values:

> Basically, I was told that I'd hit my ceiling and they wouldn't hire me. So with the community college with the emphasis on teaching, with the emphasis on student services, with the emphasis of building the next generation of leaders and students, I love the community college … We take the rough diamonds and we polish them, and I like that. That's one of the reasons why I've stuck to community college. There is no pretense about it, there is—I'm not a researcher, I'm a teacher, and there is not this pressure to publish or anything, so I really love it … I like transparency and openness. I can talk to the students, I can talk to the faculty … Graduation is my happiest day because as students have life changes, they have life issues, I can relate to them. Most of them are from the same background that I come from. I can relate to the students, especially here—98% of our students are students of color.

Although Ideye's career has been a decorated one, his only regret is not making time for more teaching. In his current community college system, he is not allowed to teach, and he misses the one-on-one relationship with students:

> One on one [is] where you really get to take the students, see them learn, mold them, mentor them. I miss that aspect of it … when you become a teacher you build a bond and you build a relationship with the students. Although I'm grateful for the opportunity to get into administration, sometimes I wonder too, would it have been better just to stay on the teaching track? But, you know, as a foreigner, it would have been very difficult for me to get that opportunity.

Individual Themes from President Ideye

Perspective and optimism as resiliency tools. Ideye has never forgotten where he came from and what he overcame. At each step of his storied career, he has been able to keep perspective and use his optimism to reframe challenging situations. His transition to his second presidency has not been an easy one, but he left his previous presidency to find a challenge. "We have our challenges, but the optimistic side of me, with every challenge, I see opportunities … so that's been my attitude of trying to turn the institution around." His optimism, perspective taking, and relentless work ethic have been hallmarks of his career. Ideye's perspective is rooted in his poor upbringing in Nigeria:

> There is no utopia in the world, but the closest place to utopia, despite all the political shenanigans … is the U.S. There is no other place in the world, if you know where I'm from, that will give you an opportunity to become a president in the world, of a college. … [In Nigeria] I would have been a teacher, maybe I'd be a professor somewhere. Even in Nigeria, that wouldn't give me the opportunity because I'm from the minority tribe. … The only country in the world whereby a kid from a small tiny village in Nigeria can become the president of an institution in the United States.

Ideye recognizes there will always be critics on his journey, but he has little concern for them at this point in his career. “There are people that are just haters … but you’re not going to sit and worry and whine about those people, come up with a positive attitude. Do the best you can.” Ideye’s ability to perspective-take also allows him not to take anything for granted and work hard for success. “Nobody is entitled to anything, you’ve got to earn it, you’ve got to work hard for it … if you work hard, you have a good attitude, you carry yourself well, the sky is the limit.”

Taking chances and working hard. Each time an opportunity presented itself to Ideye, he jumped at the chance. “Sure,” was always his response when someone offered him a chance to take on a new responsibility, assume a new position, or advance his career. Ideye grew up with little to lose, and from his perspective every opportunity can offer opportunities for success. There were times he had to build the confidence to say yes to an opportunity, but he never shut a door on prospects. Despite his unwavering optimism and strong ability to find perspective, Ideye recognizes the importance of action. “People will only open the door once for you and if you miss that opportunity, you’re gone.” Taking chances for Ideye goes beyond just saying yes to opportunities. It includes being eternally grateful to those who presented opportunities to you, as well as presenting those opportunities to others:

> Without those people really building me up, without those people really telling me all the things that I can do, without those people giving me the opportunity, I would never be the president I am today.

When recounting getting hired at an institution in the Southeast, Ideye noted that he later learned that his supervisor’s colleagues questioned hiring Ideye due to his thick

Nigerian accent. The supervisor reiterated that Ideye was the best candidate, and the supervisor's willingness to take a chance on him is something Ideye continues to be grateful for today:

> If [he] wasn't willing to take a chance on me, all of this would have been history. In fact … he's 91. I write him a note every year to thank him, because basically I don't know what my outcome would have been without him. But he was the person that really took a turn on me.

Despite seizing every opportunity and being appreciative of those who have presented them, Ideye recognizes it is hard work that helps present opportunities:

> My opinion is it has been hard work. … I mean …what doesn't kill you makes you stronger. … I think I've been very, very fortunate to meet people along the way that believed in me, that have been willing to guide me … I mean, I'm not afraid of hard work but people have been willing to take a chance on me.

Dr. Liam Kearney

I knew little about Dr. Kearney or his campus prior to my interview with him. I was making a considerable drive to interview another president in his region, and a few weeks prior I tried to identify other potential participants. In my mind driving hundreds of miles was more justifiable if it involved more than one interview. I had heard of his university once before when a colleague had done a phone interview for a position there, but I knew very little about the campus's location, history, or degree offerings. His online profile made it clear that he was a young president and that his liberal arts college was small and picturesque, but that was about all I knew prior to my interview. His assistant

had responded to my e-mails, so I had few expectations of what our conversation would be like in person. His assistant's responses were always quick, kind, and professional.

The drive to campus was significant, so I gave myself plenty of time prior to the interview. Arriving early, I spent some time in a local coffee shop a few blocks from campus. After finishing my iced coffee and many work-related e-mails, I headed to the small campus. I parked in the circular driveway outside of the small, stately building that housed the president's office and other executive functions of the college. The front steps of the building were exceptionally steep—so much so that I imagined they were no longer used due to obviously not meeting current code standards. I walked around the entire building looking for a more logical entrance. It turns out the steep steps were still the primary entry point, so I marched up and after asking a kind catering employee who was tearing down from a lunch that just finished where the president's office was, I found Dr. Kearney's assistant. She was just as warm in person, although younger than I had imagined. I was impressed by her—I had the image of a motherly mid-50s woman in my mind, but before me was a late-20s well-dressed professional with a strong attention to detail not only in her e-mails but in the coordinating colors of her outfit and on-trend office products that were arranged in order on her desk. "You must be Peter," she said. She made sure I was able to find parking, directed me to restrooms and water, and left to check in with President Kearney. Despite my being a little early, she quickly reappeared to inform me that President Kearney was ready for me. The way in which she addressed him felt more formal than I imagined for a campus of this size but didn't surprise me due to her age and professionalism. Kearney walked out, and shook my hand, and said "come on in" with little expression.

Kearney's office was tranquil but grand. It was decorated well, with high-end classic furniture that was arranged in a sensible fashion for conversation. It was tasteful and had two rooms. The first room had a fireplace, couch, and chairs for more informal conversation. Adjacent to that was the doorway to Kearney's working space that included a desk and more traditional office-like furniture. Although I was able to see into that space, we did not enter it. I sat on the couch in the lounge space and Kearney sat in the wingback chair adjacent to the fireplace—an ideal location for sharing his story.

Living in Two Worlds: President Kearney's Story

Many participants in this study, when asked about mentors, identified senior executives in higher education. Kearney had academics he spoke highly of, but one of the most salient mentors in his life was a neighbor who owned a restaurant in his neighborhood in the large Northeastern city where he grew up:

> I don't even know if he graduated high school, but he's brilliant and he's an incredible business man. He's a little younger than me … as we got to know him, I just watched the way he did things and I watched the way he got things done. … We're really different in a lot of ways, but he—he really inspired me to say you know, if you want to do this, well just go ahead—what's the problem, go ahead and do it.

Finding mentors in everyday working-class spaces demonstrates Kearney's constant battle to walk a tightrope between his working-class upbringing and academia. His path to the college presidency is one of the most traditional of the participants in the study, yet his approach to being president is anything but.

Liam Kearney is a 51-year old White man and son of Irish immigrants who serves as president for a private liberal arts college in a mid-sized city in the Southeast. His college enrolls just over 1000 students and does not track the number or percentage of first-generation college students. Kearney is in his first presidency, which he began three years ago at the age of 48. He earned his undergraduate degree from a prestigious, private liberal arts college in the Northeast and his master's and doctorate from a large private university in the Northeast.

Kearney grew up the son of Irish immigrants in a diverse working-class neighborhood where he attended a Catholic school with many peers who also came from similar families. "[There is] sort of an implicit no bullshit rule [in the] neighborhood I grew up in. ... Nobody is tolerating bullshit ever and they're going to call you on it … particularly my brothers, my family." Kearney's parents wanted all four of their children to attend college but knew little about the college process. "They didn't have the background to know what college [I should attend] or what really college even meant, other than it was a means to getting a better job." Kearney was a decent student in high school but did not take academics too seriously. His family worked very hard growing up. "We worked on construction growing up—building houses, renovating houses, working downtown. And while that paid very well ... and I enjoy building … it was enough of a disincentive to go and take school pretty seriously." When it came time to apply for college, Kearney only applied to one university, a highly selective, private liberal arts college less than two hours from his home. "We knew that it was a fine school and that if I could go there, that would probably be a good thing." It was his love of

basketball and prowess in the sport, along with a mentor, that helped Kearney secure his spot at the prestigious institution:

> The only reason I got to go there is because I was a basketball player and they were trying to build their basketball program at the time. I had a friend who I played with and I played for his father growing up in the neighborhood … he took it upon himself to get me in, and so that's how I ended up at that particular school.

Arriving on campus, Kearney immediately felt as though he did not belong. "I felt completely out of place, I mean except for the basketball program and the basketball team… I was fairly isolated and felt pretty insecure." The affluence on campus and high level of academic preparedness of his peers was a new experience for Kearney, but the older teammate from his neighborhood became a source of support. "He was a great, great student … he was able to guide me to some teachers." Kearney quickly found a professor he looked up to and a subject matter he became passionate about—philosophy. When talking about this favorite professor and mentor, Kearney pointed to a picture in his office of himself and his mentor at his presidential inauguration with a smile. Kearney is not one to show a lot of emotion, but his smile made it clear this man played an integral role in his life:

> I loved philosophy, he inspired me, he was a solid guy … somebody that I thought would be worthwhile emulating. … He was an unbelievable teacher and so I loved his class—incredibly challenging classes. … I said if I could have that much enthusiasm for life, that would be a good thing. … I loved philosophy and I would spend hours reading it. I struggled early on … reading Hegel was hard.

Not only did philosophy push Kearney to think in new ways, it helped him meet influential teachers that he still stays in touch with today. Despite enjoying philosophy, he selected a more practical major, economics. Upon completion of his bachelor's degree, Kearney extended his education by spending a year studying in Ireland. He also began to explore career options by trial and error:

> I talked about law school and I worked at a law firm and realized that wasn't what I wanted to do. I taught at a high school for a while and that was fun, I mean teaching was fun and I really got into it, but while I was there I realized I wanted to do philosophy full time.

After a few years of teaching, Kearney followed his passion and enrolled in a master's degree program at a large private university in the city to study philosophy in earnest. He continued to work with his brother and his father building houses, often six or seven days a week. He also maintained a commitment to basketball and his other athletic passion, hurling, whenever possible. His father was supportive of his advanced studies and could sense that Kearney was working hard toward his degree, despite not understanding where the degree would get his son. Kearney enjoyed the opportunity to study philosophy and follow his academic passion, but doubt often crept in:

> While I was in graduate school I had a private thought that I could never a professor. And yet, I was still going through it not believing I could do it which was an odd kind of—now that I think back, I can remember playing sports and practicing and stuff and being like, nah, I can't be a professor. But at each step along the way, you try it and you come out having done it, and then, you know,

> you teach a couple of courses as an adjunct and the responses were really favorable.

Kearney struggled in graduate school as well to reconcile aspects of himself that often felt as though they were in conflict. He was a budding academic but still desired to connect with athletics as well as his Irish heritage:

> I was wrestling with being a hardcore academic and still being a sort of fulfilled athlete. I used to train hard…. We used to train in a park by the highway and there would be dozens and dozens of guys hurling. … It was a big commitment and I used to wrestle with, do I want to do this again this summer because I wanted to learn Irish, just on my own. Go down to the city, take Irish classes. I remember driving I made the decision I'm not going to go hurling, I'm going to go learn Irish, and I remember driving on the highway by the park while they were hurling. I was like, okay, well, this—and I felt good about my decision, you're going to go learn Irish instead of doing hurling right now.

As Kearney's ability to manage multiple aspects of his identity improved and he made progress academically, his confidence increased. Greater confidence helped Kearney set his ambitions higher. He stayed at the university to pursue his PhD, and upon completion of that degree was hired to stay in a two-year professorship at the university—the first graduate student to be hired full time. After his two years, he continued down a relatively traditional academic career path, finding a job at a technology-focused institution in the area. Kearney did not enjoy the atmosphere of the technological institution but learned a lot from the challenge. The position allowed him to focus on writing his first book, and soon a tenure-track philosophy position opened at a

liberal arts college in the city. Kearney jumped at the chance and was hired. Back in a liberal arts environment, Kearney thrived as a teacher and academic and was promoted to associate professor within three years. He published additional books and carved out a research niche. Kearney began to set his sights on administrative roles and was encouraged to do so from the dean at his institution. When the dean retired at his institution, his president offered Kearney the position, a decision that was very hard for Kearney. He recalled his mother discouraging him from taking the role. “Don’t do it, she said, because you’ll never sleep. Because she knew me that way.” Always a hard worker, Kearney struggled turning the position down but after talking with mentors, he recognized that accepting the role before becoming a full professor might not be beneficial for his long-term career aspirations.

“But the bug was planted,” and Kearney was quick to get promoted to full professor. He knew he desired more than classroom teaching:

> A very honest conversation I had with myself when I was a young professor—I enjoyed a lot of positive feedback from students, but I knew then I didn’t want to be doing it when I was this age. I didn’t want to be talking to 18-year olds.

Kearney soon began to seek his own deanship at nearby universities. He felt like he had something to add to administration. In addition, living in the city was expensive, so he recognized administrative positions would help him provide for his growing family. Kearney was selected as the dean at a private liberal arts college a couple hours from the city, and despite the turmoil at the institution, Kearney jumped in and got to work. As a first-time dean with “virtually no experience” Kearney had to rely on his instincts to manage the chaos that plagued his new college community, where faculty conflicts

included threats of lawsuits and shouting matches regularly. Kearney used the native intelligence he earned from his childhood experiences to intervene in the dysfunction:

> I knew somebody had to come in there and say you're not going to act like this anymore … I could see my father doing that on a job when he was running jobs downtown and guys that I grew up and worked with just didn't have the time and certainly not the patience to listen to that bullshit, you know. So I think that kind of was ingrained in me … where do those instincts come from? Growing up in the neighborhood, playing ball, working in construction, just being aware of your environment, having respect for older people on the playground, and you learn a lot that you just cannot get anywhere else.

Kearney's direct approach and honesty were welcomed and proved to be useful management tools for the campus's challenges. His president valued his no-nonsense approach, and he and Kearney got along well. His president shared with Kearney that he hoped he would succeed him as president. That plan never came to fruition due to the president being removed from office shortly after Kearney's arrival. Another dean who had past executive leadership experience took over the presidency but continued to serve as a friend and mentor to Kearney. The new president supported Kearney's desires to be a president and nominated him for an executive leadership program to gain the network and skills to become a president. The challenges at the institution became increasingly untenable and Kearney sought presidencies quickly so that he was able to depart the university. Within a short period of time Kearney had two offers for president roles. Kearney's current institution was the better of the two opportunities, so he and his family moved over 700 miles to the small liberal arts institution. Kearney was excited for the

challenge, but it happened abruptly, and the change was particularly hard for his children. Adjusting to his role was challenging for Kearney. Not only did he have to learn to temper his directness due to regional expectations in the Southeast but he also had to learn to recognize where to draw his own boundaries with problems at work:

> I internalize way too much. … At the beginning of the presidency, I was taking on every problem, everybody's issue, and internalizing it and that's really unhealthy. … But you feel responsible for what's going on, you feel responsible if the enrollments aren't there. … You can't do it that way. … I've gotten better about learning to let things roll off a little bit.

Although Kearney appreciated the variety of challenges his position provided him and the financial security it provided his family, it came with personal compromises:

> I used to do carpentry and I used to do all sorts of stuff. I don't have time for that anymore, and I feel like my life has become too one-dimensional. And I feel like there's aspects of my life and personally that are atrophying. … I've been an athlete and I've been a carpenter, and those sorts of things are really important to my sense of self and I don't get to do them. Like living in a president's house drives me crazy because I don't work on it, it's not—it's just the staff and they—I'm not going to go out—and I don't have my tools, I don't have my workshop set up.

Kearney maintains a home in the Northeast that he works on regularly when he has the chance to visit:

> When I go home I build. I built my porch, I put the whole top floor—I did the whole thing and that's—you know, there's a sense of accomplishment and

> attachment and pride. And I recognize it's just a house but I look at it now as a really, super-expensive canvas for self-expression.

Kearney's working-class background coupled with academic training in philosophy give him a unique lens on academia:

> If I'm being totally honest, I think there's a part of me… I think because of my insecurity of where I came from … the credentials helped me because it was sort of a badge of honor … a badge of security to say, well, I've got a PhD. Not that I would ever say that to anybody, but I had it. I think it's nuts though, and I think the whole—I think education is incredibly valuable, incredibly powerful when done well, and probably, besides family, the most important thing. … But the emphasis on credential, the emphasis on status, that stuff is just nonsense to me. [There are] good teachers at lots of good schools and when that student and faculty connect in the right way, then all sorts of incredible things can happen.

Despite his critique of education and credentialism, Kearney is deeply committed to traditional educational methods including interactive learning that fosters relationships. In addition, he is not afraid to step in when necessary to manage difficult situations:

> We had an attack here a couple of months ago, a guy came—a former student came back with a bag full of knives and machete and tried to—he attacked students and stuff. I was coming from my car right there and students were running out of the café and they're screaming and running and I was like—somebody said this man has a hatchet. I was like a hatchet? That's only that big, so I took off running towards it and got there just as our police chief was trying to

> handcuff. He couldn't get it so I got the handcuffs on with the police chief and people were like, you went towards?

Heading toward a crisis is something Kearney did not think twice about, and he shared that he would do it the same way again if an incident arose. He is a reserved man, but his instinct to jump right in is driven by his deep respect for a brother who is a first-responder and by never feeling above any task, despite its challenge or level of potential danger:

> My brother does that stuff every[day]—and then he and then other people do this stuff every day with real consequences, you know? So it's a part of knowing your place, I guess is what I'm saying. And I think the world in which I grew up insisted on that, you know your place, and I think—this isn't a cause/effect equation, but built into that is—there's a depth of respect for the people that surround you in those places and that create that place, create your—so it's laden with respect.

Respect, transparency, and integrity are always guiding principles for Kearney in his role as president. They are rooted in a working-class upbringing and have helped him overcome obstacles in his presidency. As Kearney clarified, "So all of that is my way of saying I think that first-generation upbringing has definitely influenced everything I've done." When discussing future career path, Kearney was uncertain. Currently his work provides stability for his family, but he recognized the many parts of himself he has to compromise to be a college president. "There are parts of it that are very fulfilling, there's great people. Am I fulfilled? Some days." Despite the lack of clarity ahead, I am confident Kearney will continue to do what he has done throughout his life—trust his gut.

In addition, Kearney's key values of authenticity, integrity, and hard work will get him there—wherever there is.

Individual Themes from President Kearney

Reconciling working-class masculinity in the academy. Throughout Kearney's ascent in academia, he has struggled to make sense of and reconcile his working-class masculine identity. Growing up masculinity was defined by providing for your family through hard physical labor in construction attire, not suits, teaching, and desk jobs. "I think, what is masculinity for first-generation folks? And you could add variables to that, Irish, Catholic, my neighborhood, you know … so many questions of masculinity are shaped by all those different variables for sure." Kearney values and takes great sense of accomplishment from building things, just as his father and family members have done for years. In addition, his motivation, drive, and success had roots in masculinity:

> People have asked me what motivates me, especially when I was playing sports. Because I would always be the fittest guy. … I remember one time I said fear of failure, but that was a sort of superficial answer I think, I think it was—I think it's that respect for those people who you sort of unconsciously are trying to emulate or satisfy or impress, and—you know—starting with your father.

Kearney shared a poignant example of how his need to provide for his family in masculine ways conflicted with his role while teaching:

> I remember one day I was teaching and it was bring your kid to work day or something like that. I brought my daughter to work and I couldn't teach with her in the room, and I couldn't even look at her. It was the most bizarre, unexpected, unpredictable reaction, and it was purely visceral, and I—I haven't thought about

> it a whole lot, but I think it was this clash of worlds, of the sort of masculinity of building, athletics, building particularly as a profession, and the—what had to have been an ingrained notion in my mind which I was never aware of, some lesser sense of self as teacher. And it was a visceral—I couldn't talk, I could barely talk, I couldn't even—I mean, she had no idea. She was a child. And she was just interacting with the students having a pisser, you know what I mean. And I'll never forget that, it was just such an eye-opening thing for me.

Balancing insider and outsider persona in the academy. Throughout his career Kearney has always straddled the line of being an insider and outsider in academia. Some of the challenges have stemmed from social class, some have been tied to masculine working expectations, but walking the tightrope between his worlds has been a constant throughout Kearney's narrative:

> Typical immigrant story, right, that if you would look back at the major elements and major sort of undertakings that I've gone through, whether it's athletics or school or professional, I've always been straddling the inside/outside persona.

Kearney spoke of a specific example when a major newspaper did an article on Irish hurlers in his neighborhood and shared his frustration with how the photographer depicted hurling. "Of course, they picked the guys with the missing front teeth." As a hurler who also had his PhD, Kearney was much more able to manage conflicting narratives than the newspaper writer.

In his professional career Kearney often feels like an outsider but worries less about this in his career now. He talked specifically about managing his relationship with the board of trustees and potential donors in the upper echelon of his current community:

> The community in which those folks run, it's not my world. And I'm respectful, I'm—I communicate with them, I communicate well, I socialize when I have to, but it's not my go-to place and I think that that's been a source of adjustment more for them than for me. I think the presidency of this school has typically also been a site of bizarre kind of in-ness for some community members and board members, and that doesn't happen with me, and I think that's alienated some folks in a way but also brought other folks in.

Kearney has given up trying to fit in, and recognizes his approach opens doors for others as well. He "feels less like its insider/outsider than I used to" though living in two separate worlds takes its toll and will be a constant challenge in his life. "I think the inside/outside thing, you're straddling—I feel like I'm straddling that every day. Sometimes it can be paralyzing actually."

Humility. Kearney is a reserved man with pride in his many accomplishments. His Irish Catholic heritage manifests in a relatively stoic man who is not quick to warm up or be vulnerable. However, just below the surface, he has a strong respect for others and a deep humility that impact who he is and how he approaches his work. Despite his personal pride in his accomplishments, in Kearney's family successes are not a time to stop and celebrate. Having an impact is an expected outcome of working hard and caring for others. "We are a loving family, but you know, my older brother has probably saved numerous lives. And I know this for certain—his wife found a drawer full of medals he had won on the job. Nobody knew about them." I am confident if this research involved getting perspective of his family and peers, I likely would have learned more about Kearney's successes than those that he disclosed.

Kearney also attributes his humility to his family and the "no bullshit" mantra he referenced throughout our conversation:

> And so, you're always going to be humble. When I go home now, my father is 90, and I go in there, I make the tea, and I clean the dishes because my brother is older than me. And that's never changing, that's never changing. … There's zero talk of me being a college president ever. There's no difference in the status amongst our siblings. … It just never comes up, like nobody cares what I'm doing. I mean they probably do on some level, because you know, we are a loving family.

Kearney noted that although his career has been challenging and successful, unlike his brother, he is not saving lives. He is also not building homes for families like his family has done for years. Recognizing the value each of his family members adds to society keeps Kearney humble. "I'm always aware of being a pretty small player in a pretty big universe."

Dr. Andrea Jennings

I worked under Dr. Jennings in my first professional position after finishing my master's degree. At the time she was a well-respected vice president for student development at a private college in the Mid-Atlantic. She had a strong reputation as a kind and empathetic leader but was also very no-nonsense. I remember a particularly difficult situation I had with a student when I first started at the university. The student was upset with my response to her desire to circumvent rules and went directly to the vice president. Jennings's e-mail response to the student was simply, "As Mr. Paquette has made clear to you, the answer is no, and the answer is final." Jennings had won my trust

and respect with a one-sentence e-mail before I had a chance to have a conversation with her. I remember having lunch with her and another new colleague a couple weeks later. I had prepared for the meeting, because having an intimate lunch with the vice president felt intimidating as a new professional. I quickly realized I had no need to worry—despite her title, Dr. Jennings was casual and easy to relate to. Having both grown up in small towns in the Midwest, we had many points of connection in our conversation. Within a few minutes I felt at ease with her, envied her calm and centered sense of self, and looked up to her throughout my career.

Jennings continued to get promoted at the institution, and it had been rumored that she had been considered for many president roles. As I was finishing my prospectus, my Facebook timeline lit up with announcements, accolades, and support for Andrea. She had just been named president at a small, private liberal arts college in the Southeast. Not only was I excited that Andrea now fit my criteria and I knew her story would be a valuable one to include, I was excited to reconnect with her. I had seen her briefly at conferences over the eight years since I had left our previous institution, where she remained until taking on her current presidency. Despite the couple hundred miles that separated us, I was excited when her assistant responded saying President Jennings would be happy to accommodate my request. President Jennings. Andrea was never someone who cared about titles. In her 30-year career in Catholic higher education, however, she used the title when necessary in a career field dominated by men. Hearing her assistant call her President Jennings caught me off guard, but I smiled when I read the e-mail, a silent celebration of Andrea's success.

As I drove up to Andrea's new campus, lamppost banners with her face on them sprinkled the tree-lined main campus entrance driveway. The institution was particularly excited about naming their first woman president, and Andrea would be just the fourth president in the institution's near 70-year history. The president's office was temporarily relocated within the library a few years ago, but somewhere amid multiple building projects, temporary now felt relatively permanent. I imagined the president's suite would have its own stately entrance and was surprised when the entrance was literally in the library—adjacent to stacks of books. Her assistant, who arranged our meeting, greeted me by name and was glad I found their unique office location. She assured me that a new president's suite was next on the university's building projects, but I found this one to be impressive despite its location. She informed me that President Jennings was finishing a call and might be a few minutes late. Shortly thereafter Andrea came out and gave me a big hug. We walked into her office, which was a large room that was divided into distinct areas—a conference table for meetings, a desk for getting work done, and a seating area for informal conversation. The ceilings were very high and the space was decorated with tasteful furniture that was classic with a modern, timeless style. We sat at the table and caught up about her transition to the city and my own career path before starting our interview.

Rooted in Values: President Jennings's Story

When describing what motivated her to become president Jennings responded, "I think the calling to the mission, definitely. And that sort of giving back to what has been—the investment that others have made in me with the—certainly the religious aspect." Having worked for Jesuit priests her entire career, Jennings has an insider

perspective on living out Catholic and Jesuit values from a unique insider/outsider vantage point. She not only understands the values that drive Catholic, liberal arts, and more specifically, Jesuit, colleges but lives them out herself. They drive her work and give her purpose. Having insider access to three decades of the ways that priests-turned-presidents function and view the purpose of Catholic education, Jennings felt a sense of obligation and calling toward leading a similar type of institution.

Jennings's values not only impacted the types of campuses where she felt called to a presidency but also her reverence for the individuals who got her there. She spoke of many mentors throughout our conversation, all of whom attended her inauguration. However, the first people she prioritized as guests of honor at her inauguration were her administrative assistants throughout her career:

> So Ann, who was my assistant for 16 years, has always been a very strong advocate; Lisa Baker is supposed to be coming; and Marsha, you know. And so, they were certainly invaluable to me. Father Dobson is going to be a keynote at the inauguration; Father Andrews, who married Bob and I and baptized one of our children, will be the homilist at the mass.

Always remaining humble, valuing relationships, and answering a call to the profession have been key aspects of Jennings's career and will continue to drive her presidency as her narrative unfolds.

Andrea Jennings is a 59-year old White woman who serves as the president for a private, Catholic, liberal arts college with an enrollment of 3600 in the Southeast. She is in her first year as president. Jennings earned her undergraduate degree from a small liberal arts college in the Midwest, her master's degree from a large public research

university in the Southeast, and her PhD from a Jesuit research university in the Midwest. Jennings's shared that her university's first-generation student population is approximately 40%.

Jennings grew up in a town of 1400 in the Midwest and never intended to go to college. Her mother never worked outside of the home and her father and grandfather owned a gas station and tank wagon service that bore their family name. Jennings is the youngest of three children. Her brother did not attend college and her sister "sort of knew from 8th grade she wanted to be a math teacher," so her sister went to a private liberal arts college 90 miles from their childhood home. While her sister was at college, Jennings was enrolled in a specialized high school program focused on typing, which she was doing with a few close friends. Upon completing their typing course, they had planned to go to the largest city nearby to find work. In her junior year of high school, however, Jennings began to second-guess her plan. "I realized I'm not really good at this." Although her peers were typing over 100 words a minute, Jennings struggled to get 70:

> I remember the day that I went in that summer and I said to my teacher… "I've got to drop out of this, I've got to go to college." … and so she was like, oh, Andrea, I think you should stay in it, I really like you.

Jennings agreed to finish but instead focused on college prep and set her eyes on the same liberal arts college her sister was attending. Her parents had agreed that if both daughters were there they could take a car with them, and being familiar with the campus, Jennings was eager to start college. She started college with great enthusiasm. "I just loved college from day one." Jennings got involved in intramurals, landed a job serving at the campus cafeteria, and managed the basketball team. She got involved in the

student newspaper, student government, and eventually became a resident assistant in the residence halls.

Her college experience was not all positive, however. Jennings recalled making a call home to her parents during her sophomore year wanting to drop out of college. “I didn’t know what I wanted to do and I felt like I was wasting my parents’ money.” Her parents supported whichever route she chose and helped her brainstorm employment opportunities at nearby restaurants if she decided to come back home. Jennings quickly changed her mind but still lacked direction. Her sister knew exactly what she wanted to do, and the only thing Jennings really enjoyed was college itself. Jennings had taken on more student leadership roles and was a resident assistant. She was a decent student and ended up creating her own interdisciplinary major focused on communications. Things changed quickly for Jennings when the college hired a woman as dean of students. The new administrator quickly became a mentor to Jennings and was invested in her success. Jennings distinctly recalled one of her first interactions with the newly hired dean. “She called me that summer and said that she wanted me to take this new assignment. They were converting one of the men’s floors to a women’s floor and that my name had been recommended.” This was the start of a mentoring relationship that would shape Jennings’s career:

> [She] became a mentor to me and I can vividly recall when she asked me in the cafeteria, she just pulled me aside one day and she said, “Andrea, did it ever occur to you that you might not want to leave the college environment?” And you know, what senior isn’t thinking that? And I said, “Yes.” I said, “I think about that every day.” And she’s like, here’s what I think you should do.

Jennings and her mentor quickly came up with a plan where she would write the director of a student affairs master's degree program at a reputable large university in the Southeast. Despite not knowing the director of the program directly, Jennings's mentor suggested she ask if Jennings could spend their short January term at the university learning more about the field of student affairs and exploring if it were something she might want to study:

> I think they were just shocked that someone would ask for this so they accepted. So, I went down there in January and lived in a sorority house and journaled and then interviewed everybody in student affairs and attended grad classes while I was there. And then I knew this was exactly what I want to do, and then I went back the following fall for my master's. I was able to apply then for my master's while I was down there. Yeah, and that changed the course of my life.

Jennings's dean even went home with her to talk with her family over Thanksgiving break to convince her parents it was realistic career path. Jennings recalled it as a thrilling time in her life, finally finding a career path she was interested in, flying on a plane for the first time, and finding peers who were passionate about similar work. Wanting to be able to give back to future students the way her mentor did for her, Jennings wanted to be a dean of students. She recognized that getting a PhD was a wise path to achieve that goal. Her program director in her master's program encouraged her to stay for her PhD and, despite her positive experience there, she felt compelled to get experience elsewhere. She found an opportunity at a university in a large city in the Midwest that allowed her to work full-time as an assistant director of residence life while getting her doctorate. What she did not know at the time was that she would connect her

other passion at the institution. The institution was Jesuit, and Jennings quickly connected with Catholic education in the Jesuit tradition and would spend the next three decades of her career in Jesuit higher education.

The full-time role while pursuing her doctorate proved to be challenging, mainly because of politics and transitions that landed Jennings as interim director of housing within her first year. After that experience, Jennings realized the need to avoid distractions, and she finished her PhD by 27. She finally knew exactly what she wanted to do, and nothing was going to derail her from becoming a dean of students. Toward the end of her program, Jennings found a small Jesuit university in the Mid-Atlantic that was looking to convert from a mostly commuter institution to a residential campus. They sought a director of residence life, and Jennings really connected with the mission of the institution. She was thrilled when she was hired—she had applied for another position at the institution a year prior and did not get an interview. The role was challenging and helped Jennings get first-hand experience managing change and navigating students who were upset as a result of unforeseen obstacles while renovating old condominiums into residence halls. Despite the challenges of the role, Jennings loved the institution as much as the community there loved her. She was promoted to dean of students, and three years later became the vice president of student development, a role she held for almost two decades.

In her third decade at the university and now working for her third president, Jennings began to wonder what could be next in her career. However, she really enjoyed Jesuit universities, which had historically been run by Jesuit priests. A few universities had begun hiring laypersons, but Jennings was aware “that it would happen with White

men first, probably, which proved to be true." So Jennings continued to enjoy her role and focused on building her family and raising her twin daughters. Based on her seniority among the vice president team and the level of respect and esteem she held on campus, Jennings's president approached her asking her to assume a new position at the university as executive vice president:

> I thought, hmm, well that's interesting. I mean, first of all, it was like, I didn't think we really needed the position. And I asked him about that, I was like, do we really need this? … I said, "Can I think about it?" And I told him I wanted to talk to another colleague. … [The colleague] said, "Well, if you don't take it, he'll hire someone else. So, you might as well do it.… So I took that on and I thought, well, this is great. This complements each of us. I like to manage people and he doesn't and so—and he does more of the external things.

In addition, the new role allowed Jennings to stay at the university with an expanded portfolio and allowed her daughters to grow up and finish high school in one location. Jennings enjoyed the challenge but had underestimated how the job would impact the aspects of her work she enjoyed, including student interaction:

> While it was a great privilege and honor and I was supervising four of the vice presidents, I was much more in the middle than I had been in most of my career. And you don't think about that as much. I almost felt as though I became invisible to some … started losing touch with the students and then I was managing a lot of people. You know at one point I was supervising 13 direct reports so it was hard to get out of the office, and then all of the other meetings and planning, cabinet meetings, and cabinet retreats.

Jennings applied for some presidencies during this period but focused on universities nearby. Her husband was on the faculty at her university and staying close would allow him to avoid making a career transition. However, yet another opportunity for advancement unexpectedly opened up for Jennings at her current institution. She was asked to become interim president while the current president took a sabbatical:

> I would stay so that he could do the sabbatical and so it was great that that worked out. I think it was great for me and it was great for him, because you don't always get a chance to try these jobs out and see what that would be like and it was a great honor to, you know, have come from director of residence life to president and be at the same place.

Jennings continued to apply for presidencies, and her interim role made her an even more attractive candidate. "I actually had three presidential interviews in the same week while I was acting president." Jennings quickly became a finalist in multiple searches, but something was missing. During one interview that was going especially well, Jennings remembered thinking, "'Do I want this job? I don't really know if I want this job,' and that was partly because I really didn't want to leave the mission that I had been so committed to." Jennings withdrew and focused on finding a university to lead whose mission she connected with on a deep and personal level. As her search progressed, Jennings had become a finalist for the president role at her alma mater, when she received a call from a recruiter she knew. "I know you're in other searches, but I really think this is one you should look at." The opportunity was a small Catholic liberal arts college in the Southeast. Although it was not a Jesuit institution, it had a history of connection to the Jesuits. Many of its institutional values aligned with Jesuit values. The

more Jennings learned about the institution, the more she was interested. Jennings advanced in the search as well as her alma mater's but soon had another realization. "While I liked my alma mater a lot… the mission didn't resonate as much as it did in my undergraduate experience." Location also was of concern to Jennings. With daughters now in college, she desired a location with an international airport nearby. Jennings made the difficult decision to withdraw from the search at her alma mater and the other institution advanced quickly, eventually naming Jennings as their fourth president.

The search process had been a closed one, so the campus community had not had a chance to meet Jennings. After being named president, she suggested visiting campus to give remarks and meet the campus community, despite the board chair's reservations. "In corporate America we would just put the person in," was her chair's response. Jennings knew something he did not, however, and that was that college campuses are not corporate America. Throughout her career, her key to building trust was human interaction and relationships. She knew allowing the college community to interact with her firsthand as quickly as possible was essential to her success and credibility after a closed search process. Jennings's intuition was accurate, and the reception allowed her to meet over 400 people and set her up well as the incoming president.

At the time of our interview Jennings had only been president for a few months. I am confident, however, that she will continue to take advantage of all opportunities at her new university and use her values to ground her work. She will certainly be a successful president. She recounted one of her first tasks in the office—determining how faculty, staff, and students would refer to her. It was common for her to use just her first name previously, "with senior staff right away, they were uncomfortable calling me by my first

name." Jennings joked that others had encouraged her to use Madam President, but she decided that Dr. Jennings would be sufficient—she had little need to use the title of president in her everyday interactions. Many on her campus still use President Jennings, however.

Reflecting on what allowed her to achieve success in her career, Jennings attributed taking advantage of any opportunity that presented itself including being on accreditation committees for other universities, serving on boards of local organizations, and even serving an interim period as vice president for advancement, despite having little experience to do so. Constantly recognizing where her strengths are needed and aware that she had something to add, Jennings always stepped up. "When the advancement vice president left suddenly … I basically volunteered to be the interim vice president for advancement because I felt like, you know, who is going to do it?" It was these opportunities that ultimately helped Jennings land her presidency, particularly at an institution that had a strong nursing program when none of her previous employers had offered degrees in healthcare fields. But Jennings was able to talk about the needs of the healthcare industry and nursing preparation due to her membership on a healthcare boards. In another instance, she was asked to be on the board of trustees for a university that was struggling financially. "One of the other vice presidents, a male, said to me, 'Why would you go on that board?' I said, 'Well, often you learn more in a bad situation than a good one.'"

Jennings sees the chance to learn in every opportunity, and noted that the resiliency she learned from navigating educational systems without the help or support of her parents helped her navigate challenging situations including sexism. "I was a woman

in a male-dominated hierarchical structure. You know, it wasn't something I was proud of, but I was the single woman administrator for like 20 years at my previous institution." Jennings was determined to not let the challenges hold her back, and she joked about her first graduation after being named vice president, where she was literally seated behind ferns among the stage party. But she used her role to clear pathways for those coming behind her and was committed to making higher education and her institution a more welcoming place:

> There was a lot of paving the way … there wasn't a lot of diversity, there weren't a lot of women, there weren't a lot of people of color or certainly gay or lesbian. I had, actually, in my very first year—well the first two years, two out of my four assistant directors came out and it was at a Catholic college in early years.

Change didn't happen as quickly as Jennings had hoped:

> It was discouraging to see that it was taking a long time for women and others to get into it. … While they might have made it to vice presidency or associate or assistant, they were taking a lot of responsibilities for supervision and management and helping functions more than what we might say decision-making functions.

Even toward the end of her tenure at her previous institution, when Jennings participated in a national leadership program for administrators aspiring to the presidency, she saw few women. Jennings continues to focus on creating a pathway for women and feels her new role will allow her to do that in more substantial ways. Within a couple weeks of arriving at her new institution to serve as its first woman president, a group of CEO women invited her to meet them. "I mean, the reception was for me, and

that's never happened to me." Diversifying campus and focusing on the campus climate are now a top priority for Jennings in her first year as president.

Individual Themes from President Jennings

Commitment to institutional values. Jennings found an institution where she could connect on a deep and personal level with the values early in her career. Once she had that it was difficult to find another campus that could compare. She turned down many job opportunities because she was not willing to compromise a personal connection to values:

> Resonating with the mission … then you knew it was right, you know? Like with many things, people always say, well you'll know when it's right. But you don't believe that when you're in it, you know. And then I did know, and so people always say to me that, you know, they're so pleased and I always say, "Well, I'm glad we found each other."

Not only was it important to resonate with the mission and values but Jennings felt a call to her profession. After three decades of working for priests in the role of president at her institution, Jennings felt she was uniquely situated and had an obligation to carry on their approach, especially in an age of fewer priests on university campuses. She took a risk to give back what they had invested in her:

> We know that the decline of religious has occurred, but also those … aren't just looking for a presidency that, and I don't mean that in a bad way, but some would grasp it but may not have the sort of historical perspective on it. I felt that people had invested in me. … They took a risk on a pretty young professional … now I should.

Connecting with people. In addition to connecting with an institution's mission, Jennings invests in people. She never forgot the mentor who helped her start her career in student affairs and higher education, and she does all she can mentor others. She made certain that all of the individuals she has mentored and those who have mentored her were at her inauguration, included her beloved support staff. Some may see this as a kind gesture, but for Jennings she cannot imagine any other way than to respect and honor those who have been a part of her journey, no matter how big or how small:

> I grew up in a small town and went to a small college and I like being close, so I'm very present on campus and that's something that is important to me. You know, I walk to campus, I come at night, I come on weekends, I go to activities, and that's just part of my DNA of—but I think a lot of that probably goes to the loving college from day one but also the orientation to student affairs.

Jennings is often on campus at all hours of the day and she is a leader of and for the people. She lives near campus—something she has made sure to be able to do at each campus so that she could walk to work:

> One of the things from walking around is that I typically see many more staff, I see staff for environmental services, I see dinging staff, and they're coming—because I walk at like 6:00 in the morning or 8:00 at night and it sort of energizes them.

It is her relationships with the campus community and her casual sense of self that allows her to build respect and trust quickly. It is also the thing that folks remember best about Jennings. She lives out her value of respecting others daily. "You can advocate for

things and lose, but in the end … people can forget everything else … but you want to be respected."

Dr. Keith Cook

The drive to Dr. Cook's campus took me through rural parts of the Southeast. The route involved passing two exceptionally large Confederate flags flying high above the two-lane roads I took to get there on an early morning in July. Growing up in the Midwest and now having lived in cities, the presence of Confederate flags, which to me has always carried a message of oppression and exclusion, caught me off-guard. Upon getting to the small town where the college was, I was still uneasy. I was unsure what the political and social atmosphere would be and did not know if it was a place a gay man should be venturing on his own. As I drove up to the small residential liberal arts college, I began to ease. The campus was small, and I could sense it was a liberal arts college that focused on educating working-class students. The cars in the parking lot were early-2000 models of mostly Ford, Chevrolet, or Dodge—American made. The campus was picturesque and welcoming. The landscaping was tended to, but the campus was not as pristine as more highly selective campuses. I felt at home. This campus felt very similar to the small college I attended, despite its relatively rural location. The downtown area of the small town blended into the edge of campus, making the campus feel larger.

Arriving early, I drove around the edge of campus and found the best place to park adjacent to the president's office. The office, and others nearby, appeared to have former lives as stately residential homes that had since been donated to the college and renovated. The feel of walking into what appeared from the exterior to be a home made me feel welcomed. I walked into the door and immediate to the left was an open-area

reception space and Dr. Cook's assistant welcomed me by name. She immediately felt familiar to me and reminded me of many of the warm women who worked in the offices across my own campus as a college student—a smiling face happy to assist students or campus visitors. She asked about my drive, and I chose not to share with her my anxiety around the large Confederate flags. She continued to share with me a detailed history of the small town and the industry in the town that keeps the campus and the municipality thriving. Her history and context were useful and her passion for the campus and town was infectious.

She stepped away for a minute and came back to tell me President Cook was ready for me. I walked into his office where he was sitting at his desk seemingly preoccupied by something on his cell phone. "Have a seat and just give me a sec," he said. I sat at the table and noticed that the office was decorated how I had imagined—warm and traditional office furniture. Despite the numerous windows, it was morning and it would not be until the afternoon that the sun came directly in those windows, so it was surprisingly dark. The president got up from his desk and apologized for being on his phone. He explained there had been a student in the emergency room and he was texting with the student about how he was. Luckily, he was making a full recovery. I found it surprising that the president himself was texting with a student but appreciated his concern for his students. He caught me a bit off guard when he asked if I minded if someone sat in on our interview. He was hosting an American Council on Education (ACE) fellow through an executive mentoring program, and he felt it would be beneficial for the fellow to join us. I shared with him that as the participant, that decision was his to make, and I was glad to honor his preference. He went to get his fellow, an early-40s

White man from a nearby private college. He introduced himself and shared a little about his background as a professor. He explained that he also led an office at his university focused on excellence in teaching and learning. We closed the door and all sat at the table in Cook's office. Unlike other offices, the table only sat four, but it served our needs well for the interview.

Transparent to a Fault: President Cook's Story

Cook stumbled upon the liberal arts almost by accident. It was not until he had finished his degrees and was well into his career in higher education that he understood what a liberal arts college meant and how it benefitted students. He had to quickly study up on what it meant to be an administrator at a liberal arts college, once hired at one. Explaining how he caught himself up to speed on liberal arts colleges:

> There's like a book called the *Idiots Guide to the Liberal Arts* and it's maybe like 400 pages and you get a really quick synopsis of all of the different, you know, philosophies—all of the things that you would get in a traditional liberal arts education that I read cover to cover so that I was—and there are still times I feel inadequate to have discussions with certain departments.

Despite connecting with liberal arts colleges later than he wished he had, Cook has not looked back and wishes he had learned earlier in life that he could have afforded to attend the prestigious liberal arts university near his home:

> Ironically, [it is] five minutes from where I did my undergrad … They have such a discount rate that I could have gone literally for almost exactly the same price I paid to go to the state school. I could have gone to a top 100 liberal arts college

> and I had the ACT score that I could have gotten in … just didn't have that kind of guidance or counseling at the time.

Cook's lack of a liberal arts background has left him feeling like somewhat of an outsider, but he has connected deeply with the mission of liberal arts colleges while working at them and now presiding over one. He has found his academic home and has no intention of going back to public universities. As he described learning about the liberal arts, Cook was unabashedly transparent, a signature aspect of his identity and presidency. "I tend to be very transparent and rather random." Cook's transparency has worked to his benefit because his community always knows where he stands on things, but at times it has also had its challenges:

> I have a very transparent kind of approach to things, so I have told faculty and staff, etc., don't ask me unless you really want to know my opinion. And that's getting me in trouble at times. That was inherited from my father, by the way, and I learned with one constituency, the board, that I had to be careful with that. My own personal learning style is to learn by talking, so I like to talk through things. That does not work with the board because they immediately thought, oh, this is a new crazy idea. Well, 10 minutes in I might realize that's not a crazy idea, but I need to talk through it and have that discussion. It doesn't work with that particular group.

Cook has since learned to use others to talk through his ideas before sharing them with his board, just one of many lessons he has navigated as a first-generation college president that have helped him succeed.

Keith Cook is a 55-year old White man who serves as president for a private liberal arts college with an enrollment of just over 1200 in the Southeast. His current role is his first presidency, which he began eight years ago. Cook earned his undergraduate degree from a state institution in his Southern home state. He earned his master's from the flagship university in the same state and his PhD from a research university in a nearby state. Cook was unsure of the current number of first-generation students enrolled at his college but anecdotally shared it had been as high as 47% at one point in the institution's recent history.

Cook grew up in a lower-middle-class background with blue-collar parents in a small town just outside of a large city in the South. Cook's town had two middle schools that fed into the town's high school. One middle school was well-resourced and the other struggled. Cook attended the less-resourced middle school and despite his strong grades in middle school struggled to adapt at high school:

> I was the only kid from my side of the tracks [in] high school that went to the honors classes. … That was really hard, that was a hard adjustment to be the only kid. … I didn't have anybody from my peer group in my high school that was in my college-bound classes … because they really had no aspirations. They were there to take the easy classes. … We had some very smart kids from our [high] school who wound up going to Yale or Harvard and everything else, but they all went to the other feeder junior high school.

College was an expectation, but it was clear that Cook should not set his aspirations too high—his educational destiny was impacted by attending a poorly resourced middle school. His family did not explore private colleges. They deemed a

private education to be cost-prohibitive. Cook enrolled at the local state university and, due to his rigorous high school experience, entered with enough credits to have sophomore status. He chose his undergraduate major, accounting, "based on the person I was sitting beside in my accounting class. She was an extremely attractive young lady." Despite his career decision-making approach being rooted in self-interest, Cook later learned he was pretty good at accounting and managed to complete his undergraduate degree in just three years. Academics came easy to him and he joked that his most challenging course was "probably volleyball or something." Upon graduating, Cook continued to excel at accounting. "I went to work in industry and worked for four years in industry and this is going to sound more arrogant than I mean it, but I was pretty good so I got promotions." The job market was lucrative for CPAs at the time, but despite offers from some of the biggest names in accounting, Cook took a position at an unknown entrepreneurially minded start-up:

> It sounded more interesting to me, the owner was there doing some really cool stuff and, you know … it actually gave me a much better experience than had I gone to one of the big four firms, eight firms at the time.

Despite his success, Cook had higher aspirations and decided to pursue his MBA at the flagship institution in the state. "Somewhere—and it wasn't family—somewhere along the road I had read that it was good to have your degrees from different institutions." Cook was an excellent test-taker. "I'm one of those types that tests really well but is not very smart." His test scores helped Cook secure a full scholarship to earn his MBA. He had originally intended to get his degree while working but after taking one

class realized that would not be feasible, “so I gave up a fairly lucrative kind of career. My boss told me I was crazy for doing that.”

Cook had planned to get his master’s degree and teach accounting at a community college. To do so, he dedicated his MBA electives to learning more about his passion of accounting. Eventually Cook set his sights higher, aspiring to earn a PhD. It took Cook awhile and a lot of coaxing from his master’s thesis advisor to convince him to pursue a PhD. “He was the one who really pushed me to go get a PhD. He just saw something in me that quite honestly, I didn’t see in myself.” It took Cook a year to agree with his advisor:

> I mean, I knew I wanted to teach and I knew immediately that I could relate to students and that I thought I would be a good teacher. I questioned whether I could do the whole dissertation part because while I think I write pretty well, I do not write quickly. … Any long kinds of things I stay away from here because it’s just a very slow process. So he would throw things at me and encourage me to write these short articles, and we actually had a couple of little minor hit kind of publications. Yeah, it probably took a year to convince me to do that.

To pursue a PhD, however, it made the most sense for Cook to switch from the MBA program to an MSA program. Switching programs resulted in giving up his full-tuition scholarship, but Cook was later able to secure a teaching assistantship, which helped point him further toward his passion. “I knew the first day after going in with my hands shaking, giving the syllabi to 200 people that this was what I needed to do.” Cook applied to PhD programs and was accepted at a research institution that was not his top choice but seemed like the most logical decision. Cook vividly remembered his first

assignment. He was to write a 20-page paper on the six major theories in his field. Within one week he had to write six separate 20-page papers, totaling 120 pages in seven days:

> So I called my mom and said, so I have made a mistake and so this—the whole PhD program … there was nobody there to say here's any kind of advice to give you, so I was the last person to leave the library for the entire week. And I gave him his six 20-page papers and only half the class came back and he put a check mark on the peoples' papers and said, "Welcome to boot camp," and then it was on. He really wanted to see who was dedicated and who was not.

It was during his PhD program that Cook began to understand more clearly that research-intensive universities did not connect with his passions. It was also there that he felt challenged academically for the first time. Cook was pushed to publish in top-tier journals and pursue tenure-track positions at top research universities. His first assistantship as a PhD student was focused on research. "After a year of that, I decided that's not the kind of institution I want to be at because I'm just not enjoying that—that's not what I want to do for a living." He then got to teach upper-level accounting courses in lieu of research, but it was not until he began adjunct teaching at a religiously affiliated college 45 minutes away that Cook found his passion. At the campus, he felt a connection to the smaller classes and meaningful teaching that impacted on students. He also met the woman who would become his wife at the university. When one of the accounting faculty retired, the dean approached him about the position and shared that the pay would be lower than positions at research universities, but that if Cook was interested, the role was his. Much to his PhD advisor's chagrin, Cook took the role. "He had a list of schools that

he had me interviewing at and a small Baptist college in the rural South was not on that list."

After taking the position, Cook's career trajectory shifted quickly. At his first faculty meeting with the department, the provost announced that the dean of the business school had been dismissed and that they would have a succession plan within a few days. A couple days later Cook was called into the provost's office. "I really thought, okay, so this tenure-track job is getting ready to get pulled … and he says,'Sso you're the only one in the department who has worked in industry and has management experience, would you consider being interim dean?'" Cook only saw the opportunities in the role and had little insight into the challenges of the role, so he jumped at the chance—a decision he would have made differently today:

> So really my first job in higher ed was as interim dean of the business school. Looking back, I should have said no to that. I had no earthly idea—and it delayed my dissertation completion and I had no idea what I was doing. But they—I guess, temporary insanity or whatever, thought I was doing okay—so they offered me the position and I stayed another three years as dean. Looking back now, I was not a good business school dean at all, but it is what it is.

In his early 30s and already the dean of a business school, Cook fulfilled his role but was not satisfied with his position. Cook also advised a student group and during one of their competitions he had met a trustee from a liberal arts institution in a nearby state. Cook made a strong impression on the trustee, and the trustee convinced his university to offer Cook a faculty position. "By that point I had realized that being a dean wasn't my strength, so they called and said, 'Would you be interested in coming to interview for an

accounting position?'" The university was willing to match his salary, and the position would allow Cook to focus on his first love in higher education—teaching. "My administrative career over, I'm going to teach accounting and that's what I love and that's what I'm going to do."

Cook loved his new position but within the first year of his role the dean of the business school passed away unexpectedly. The direction and approach of the new dean did not connect with Cook's values and approach. Cook approached the provost and shared that he was happy at the university and in the city but that he could not continue working under the dean. The provost came up with a plan to retain Cook. "Ao they put me in training to be the dean of their graduate and adult program and so I literally trained for that for a semester and that had been announced that I was going to be the heir-apparent to the dean who was retiring." Cook had a "native love" for adult students and was excited for the new role. He felt his first-generation identity helped him relate to non-traditional students. The summer before he was to begin his deanship, however, the dean of the business school was fired:

> And so the president calls me in this time and says, "So we have this opening here, which would you rather do? Do you want to be the dean of the graduate and continuing studies program or the dean of the business school?" I thought, "Well, given these options, I probably know more about business" and, so I went back to being a business school dean. By this point I actually knew what I was doing after having been in the academy for seven or eight years and led them through actually AACSB [AACSB International—The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business] accreditation, which was a really big deal at the time.

Throughout his second tenure as a business school dean, the president encouraged Cook to consider an ACE Fellowship—a year-long experience allowing executive and presidential aspirants a "behind the stage" view of university executive administration. The first year he applied and interviewed, Cook was not selected as a fellow. He recalled attempting to answer the panel's questions about his long-term goals. "I had no earthly idea what I wanted, I had never really thought about that." He reapplied the next year and focused on his skill sets and strengths: fundraising, relationship-building, and connecting with the community. He realized his skills aligned most closely with the role of president and in his second year was placed as a fellow at the prestigious liberal arts college that was just five minutes from his undergraduate institution—a university he could have easily attended if he knew more about financial aid at private colleges at the time. Cook had the opportunity there to work for what he called "the most visionary guy in all of higher education, hands down." It was his experience as a fellow and at small colleges that helped him solidify his values when he began his own presidential search. He knew a liberal arts college would be his ideal place to serve as president. After completing his fellowship, Cook actively began his presidential search and had firms contacting him regularly. After visiting his current campus, he knew where he needed to be:

> I was a finalist in three searches, came here first and we decided on the plane on the way home that if I got this offer, this is where I wanted to be. Eight and a half years later, here we are.

It was what Cook witnessed on campus that drew him to his current institution:

> I was walking to campus that night, in my spare time, after the interview day was over with, and I wandered into the library and there was a study session going on

> with a Spanish professor giving an exam review. And so I asked about it the next day, thinking they staged this thing really well, and no, the kids just needed more and he was doing that, and I thought, "I don't know that I've ever been at an institution where that would happen," you know, just because they needed more help kind of thing. That's the kind of place that I wanted to be.

Throughout Cook's career he developed a great appreciation for small colleges rooted in the liberal arts and wished he had been exposed to liberal arts education earlier in life. It was at his second university that Cook understood the true value of liberal arts education, "The core actually—if you completed the core you wound up with a minor in global studies. And that's where I became intrigued with this idea of that, okay, so these kids are getting educated differently than I did." When talking about his duties as president, he recognizes connecting with his liberal arts faculty would be more natural for him with a liberal arts degree:

> No slight meant to my undergraduate institution because they taught me how to be a really good accountant … I think if I had gone to a liberal arts class and taking an art appreciation class, been forced to take an art appreciation class, that I would have been better prepared for this job.

Despite, or perhaps because of, his lack of background in liberal arts, Cook values his current institution and its commitment to holistic individualized education, including the opportunities it provides students. It is not only the small liberal arts campus he values but the type of student his institution draws:

> I like the kind of students we have here. I like the first-generation students, I like the fact that I travelled with one of them to Malaysia and we were at a business

> conference and I had to take him to Belk to help him pick out his belt and shoes because he had no idea … I tend to be much more drawn to the Pell-eligible kid whose parents can't give them any advice at all. … That probably detracts from my job a little bit because if you gave me a choice between flying to New York to talk to a donor, which I know I've got to do, and sitting down and giving career advice to this kid who has nobody at home, I'm going to lean that way every single time.

Cook also makes it a point to mentor individual students to remain connected to students, the mission of the institution, and his own desire to make an impact. "Every year I pick two or three students to mentor, and it is purely selfish on my part because I've got to have—if not, I won't be able to have the kind of interaction I need." In addition to being able to serve as a mentor, his liberal arts campus has allowed him to learn things he never imagined and find ways to connect those to the mission. Cook shared a story about how his campus has become a Steinway piano campus, forming a partnership with the prestigious company that handcrafts each piano. Cook led the campaign to raise funds for this expensive endeavor, but after touring the headquarters where each piano is made, the pitch became simple:

> When they talk about the Steinway, a particular piano, they will refer to her … and actually that worked very well with our donors when I made the comparison to them for that. That's exactly what we do at a place like this. It's a more expensive process and it is extremely time consuming and there are frustrations involved and sometimes the wood isn't cut correctly for them and sometimes it takes a path that we don't want them to go on.

Cook values the way his institution opens doors for students in the way others cannot, and he is unapologetic in the university's mission to do so. He values helping students with average test scores do amazing things and spoke with great enthusiasm about an alumnus who "came here to play basketball and he started out in art and an art faculty member saw a spark in him … and pushed him into creative writing classes. … He went on to get his creative writing PhD." The alumnus has since gone on to win a $600,000 McArthur Fellowship. Cook recognized his institution must also make room for students across the spectrum of achievement. He noted how a student with a 1510 SAT was deciding between his institution and an Ivy League university. One parent wanted her at his institution and the other wanted her at the Ivy:

> Her parents are both college professors and she got down between us and one of the Ivies … so they sat in my office and we had this discussion. I said, "I'm not sure what I would tell you to do, but we have a biologist here who is one of the leading researchers [in her interest area] and he will let her do research [while she is still] an undergraduate freshman. That will not happen when you go to Yale or whatever. You'll be lucky—you may get that superstar teacher, but you're not going to be in their lab would be my guess," and we have her here.

Cook ended the portion of our conversation about students at his institution by using his signature attribute of transparency. "I have no tolerance for any of our faculty discussions over whether we should raise the SAT profile. No, go to someplace that has a higher one because that's not who we are and what we're about."

At 55 and having eight years' experience as a college president, one cannot help but wonder what is next for Cook, especially because he has already exceeded the

average tenure for a college president. “I never say never, but I can’t imagine the situation where I would go and I’m a president somewhere else.” Cook has had offers—some from prestigious institutions with a much higher national profile than his, and ones that would pay him significantly more. But each time he has turned down the offer or withdrawn from the search. “I think I can make a bigger difference here than I could make at a place that was much higher on the food chain.” Cook also noted that “money is not a driver for me … I want enough to have a decent kind of living.” Despite being content with his current position, Cook looks forward to someday having a personal life again. He recognizes that his job and his small community make little room for activities where he does not have to function in the role of college president. He imagines being at the institution for four more years, then potentially exploring consulting opportunities.

Individual Themes from President Cook

Humility, transparency, and intelligence as resiliency tools. Cook will be the first to make it known that transparency is one of his greatest strengths and, at times, it has been one of his greatest challenges. “Maybe I’m just not smart enough to know how to not be transparent,” he joked. Cook always attributes his transparency to his father. In the spirit of transparency, he was shameless as he described his hiring practices:

> I have never personally suffered from insecurity, so it doesn’t bother me to know that all of my vice presidents are smarter than I am. And so I’ve got people in those positions and they come and they bring great ideas.

To hire individuals who are smarter than he is requires a level of humility—something that has been a part of Cook’s persona throughout his career. His humility is also present in his practical spending habits. “We drive Hondas at our house.” Despite his

contentment with simple things, he is aware of the ways his position and income allow him to offer things for his daughter he was unable to have. For example, the family is planning a trip to China for her graduation this coming spring, investing in experiences over possessions. Although Cook can take his family to China, he never forgets where he came from. He works diligently to make sure his daughter does not either:

> Coming from humble roots helped me to stay humble when sometimes—I worry about that with my daughter because she comes from a different kind of—not that we're affluent by any means, but certainly we don't have the same—I had not traveled … to six countries by the time I was a high school senior. And so I do worry that we continually try to build in processes to keep her having some of that humility piece.

Accidental president. Cook never set out to be a college president or an administrator. He joked throughout our conversation about how difficult it was for mentors to convince him to push himself further, which led to a presidency. "I call myself an accidental president." Cook's career path had numerous unexpected twists and turns, but his faith has guided him throughout:

> I have a pretty strong faith background and so I've always had that belief that I get placed where I'm supposed to be placed. It takes lightning bolts to move me to those kinds of places, but that's been part of the journey as well.

Despite his path being an unexpected and unique one, it has also been a successful one:

> My goal from day one here was to leave the place better than it was when I came. And if you go to even my harshest critic on campus, the art chair, she would tell you we're a better place than we were on day one.

As Cook contemplates the ways in which his position and unexpected career path have changed the course of his life and that of his family, he turns to his daughter and the options she is going to have in her life with parents who know how to navigate higher education. He is careful to make sure she does not forget her own roots, however. "It really has shaped my parenting style with her." Cook shared about how he was able to expose his daughter, an aspiring performer, to Tony Award–winning performers. Hearing the challenges of their careers, she has decided to use her skills in other ways, a much more sophisticated approach to career decision-making than Cook's own. When Cook compared his daughter's college preparation process to his own, he noted:

> I guess that's a product of we just didn't have those family discussions, because all my parents knew was that I needed to go to college. Because they didn't want me to have the kind of lifestyle that they had. They had no idea, none of us had any idea, that it would end up this way.

Dr. John Stephens

In my field notes following my conversation with Dr. Stephens, I wrote, "Stephens stood out as the most responsive, accommodating, and kind individual from the moment of contacting him throughout the entire interview. There's a warmth about him—genuine care and concern for others, and a kindheartedness that is palpable." Within 24 hours of sending Stephens an e-mail asking him to participate in the research, he had personally written me back a detailed e-mail with dates and times he was available

as well as driving and parking instructions at his campus, a private university in the Southeast about 30 miles outside of a major city. Throughout our e-mail exchanges Stephens reiterated how excited he was to meet me and to participate. Having reviewed his profile on the university's Web site, I was not surprised by his personal approach—his biography was written with personal touches and he had significant experience in student affairs functional areas. I was excited to meet and learn from him.

Driving to his campus from another interview about an hour away, I grabbed some lunch at a drive-through fast food restaurant and kept moving to make sure I got to the campus early enough to drive around prior to my interview with Stephens. I remember pulling into the campus off a busy highway and being impressed with the landscaping and how active the campus was. It was one of my first interviews on a campus after classes were back in session for fall semester. Driving around campus, many students were walking together, playing sports, and enjoying one another's company. I was surprised by the large population of students of color at the campus—something I had not expected for a small private college. It was a refreshing sight—nothing from the Web site or from those familiar with the campus with whom I had interacted suggested it would be a diverse institution.

I parked my car and was able to follow Stephens's detailed instructions about where to find his office with ease. It was in a building that shared space with Admissions, and with classes in session the building was busy with prospective students and their families. I was a bit tired heading into the building. I had gotten up early to make it to my first interview and, having not done multiple interviews on the same day yet, I was second-guessing my decision to do so. After walking into the red brick building that was

impressive but not overly stately, I found the president's suite on the top floor, exactly as Stephens's instructions directed me to do. I had a very brief interaction with his assistant before a young energetic president came out of the double doors of his office and greeted me. He looked pristine in a sharp suit and tie, offered me a handshake with direct eye contact, and requested, "Please—come on in."

As someone who appreciates physical spaces, good design, and effective spatial layouts, I was in awe of Stephens's office. The footprint of the room was a half-circle with double-doors in the middle of the non-curved wall. Immediately to the left when you walked through the double doors was a gorgeous desk space. Consistent with how pristine Stephens' was dressed, his space was orderly with just a few papers on top of the desk that he seemed to be reviewing before our conversation. Straight ahead was a perfectly arranged sitting area with on-trend mid-century modern furniture and, if memory serves me correctly, fresh flowers. To the right was a conference table that sat six and a flat screen for presentations. Even the chairs at the table, which is where we sat for our interview, were carefully selected to fit the design aesthetic flawlessly. The wooden furniture was made from a rare wood with gorgeous variegation in its medium brown with gray undertones. There was modern art on the walls, and a perfect color scheme that was calming yet inspiring. The furniture was clearly new and struck an ideal balance between classic style and mid-century finishes with modern, clean line accents. In retrospect, I wish I had taken a picture so that I could keep it as a reminder of future goals. Stephens could see my enthusiasm when I paused to admire the space and explained to me that when he took over as president there was oversized dark furniture crowding the space. He wanted to redo the space quickly to make it more welcoming and

airy, and a friend of the university suggested he come to his nearby furniture factory and that he would be happy to help Stephens outfit the space. Stephens laughed as he explained that he thought he was picking up individual pieces that day and had asked a maintenance staff person to assist him by bringing a large van. To his surprise, Stephens was picking out all custom furniture and finishes that day, with the assistance of a professional designer, and the furniture would be delivered several weeks later. Stephens's space was a true representation of his calm and orderly personality. For the first ten minutes of our conversation, I answered questions Stephens posed about my own education, career path, and aspirations—something that none of the other participants had inquired about.

The Unicorn Who Made It Out: President Stephens's Story

John Stephens' is an anomaly for college presidents. He earned his undergraduate and master's degrees from the current institution where he serves as president. He has also spent the majority of his professional career there:

> It's funny when I meet presidents from other colleges and universities and they ask me how long have I been in this position and where was I before and what did I do before. I mean, they look at me as if I'm a unicorn. To have spent my career at the place where I graduated from and move from enrollment management to the presidency, they're like, this just doesn't happen. And so… sometimes it's just better to be lucky than good.

His sense of humor and kindness are hallmarks of the way he approaches his work. Stephens's connection with his first-generation identity felt the strongest of the

participants in the study—he was able to articulate its impact on his experience and approach. He recognized his first-generation as both a strength and challenge:

> There's a shadow side to my being a first-gen. I think it helps a whole lot more than it hurts and that's because I think most people who innately get the academy have grown up in it as a part of their expectation. They don't understand how most people away from a college and university live or what they think about or what they care about. You know, it helps me to have two sisters who struggle to make ends meet and who, when they saw this office, you know, they couldn't believe that somebody came to work in a place like this.

Working at a university that has over one-third of its students coming from first-generation backgrounds, Stephens's identity is a benefit to himself and to the institution. Yet, when meeting Stephens, aside from his warmth and openness, little stands out that identifies him as coming from meager roots. "People are always surprised. They make assumptions about me when they meet me—you know, about where I came from and what my background is."

John Stephens is a 52-year old White man who serves as president for a private university in the rural South with an enrollment just over 3000. The university has a strong liberal arts program but does not identify itself primarily as a liberal arts college. His current role is his first presidency, which he began two years ago. Stephens earned his undergraduate and master's degrees from the institution where he is currently president. He earned his EdD remotely from a public research university in the South while working full-time. Stephens detailed that 33% of students at his campus are first in their family to go to college and 44% are the first to earn a college degree.

Stephens grew up in the rural South and for the first five or six years of his life, he lived with his single mother and grandparents in a small home. His mother eventually married, and his stepfather adopted him after returning from a military assignment in Vietnam. Stephens's home was on a dirt road named for his great-grandfather, and the only neighbors on the road were his cousins. Stephens attended the same school building from first through twelfth grade, and of the 70 students he graduated with from high school, around 10 went on to study beyond high school. As Stephens describes it while growing up, "I just wanted out of there. Both of my sisters are there, all of my family is there, and it's still poor and it's mean and it's small, not just in the physical sense, but in its world view."

In high school, Stephens's school offered vocational opportunities for students who were not considering college. At that time in his life, Stephens was only worried about athletics and played four different sports in high school. The opportunity to attend the vocational center in his junior and senior year and engage in art while focusing on sports was attractive, so he signed up after touring the vocational center during a class trip his sophomore year. His mother was unhappy about his decision and made her expectation for him to attend college clear:

> I remember very clearly our phone ringing the day I turned in the paperwork and it was my aunt. And she said to my mother, "I thought you wanted John to go to college." And she said, "I do." She said, "Well, you can't let him go to vocational school." And my mother said, "Thank you," and hung up the phone. And my mother swore like a sailor, and so she—then she started swearing at me about what I was thinking. I was like, I didn't know, you know. I didn't know either.

> But if it hadn't been for Aunt Ruth, I would have, you know—who knows, been up there doing commercial art just to—because we didn't know any better.

Despite his poor rural upbringing, Stephens had the benefit of his Aunt Ruth, who lived just down the road. Ruth went to college and was a high school guidance counselor. Stephens was open to attending college, but he wanted to play football, which his parents supported. Unsure how to make his dream of college football a reality, Stephens's father shared advice from a friend who owned a restaurant he frequented. "You should tell John to go to the junior college that I went to … and you know, improve himself and then he could go on to a four-year school." Stephens was "undersized and small" and his football team "was awful and nobody was interested." Because of these factors, the junior college was a logical step, and Stephens recalled his lack of knowledge in making the decision to attend. "I didn't even know there was such a thing as a junior college and a senior college." The school was in the mountains about five hours from his home and was a feeder football program for two strong NCAA Division I football programs. Stephens appreciated that the football team was a diverse group of young men from all over the Southeast.

Stephens described himself as an "above average" student in high school but never saw himself as strong or exceptional academically. When he got to junior college, he had to take a math placement test and after they called the names for students to either take college algebra or remedial math, his name had not been read. He was the only one remaining. Stephens, who was not confident in his academic abilities, was certain he had failed out before even starting. "As it turns out I had tested into pre-calculus and hardly anybody did that at this junior college, and at the time I didn't know that it was special."

Despite placing into a higher-level math class, Stephens worried about his academic performance:

> I was really nervous about making it and so I think it was—that motivated me to buckle down, to study hard, and so every afternoon when I had a spare moment, I was in the library. … I joined study groups. It was motivation out of fear because I didn't think I was supposed to be there.

Slowly but surely Stephens began to realize he had little to worry about academically. After his first semester, his English teacher pulled him aside and said, "'You made an A in my class, people rarely do that.' And I was like, 'Really?' She was like, 'Yeah, you're a good student.' It was the first time somebody had said that to me." Stephens finished his first year strong, but it was not until the following year that he realized how well he had done academically. The summer before his sophomore year, Stephens was unsure if he would be able to return— his family was short $1000 for tuition despite the grants he received. Because of the financial hardship, Stephens had not registered for classes, and the associate dean of students called him to inquire why he had not registered. Stephens shared that he could not afford the tuition, to which the associate dean responded:

> He said, "If I told you that you had been awarded a scholarship that you weren't supposed to find out about until you got back, would that help?" And I said, "How much is it?" He said, "$2K." I said, "Of course." So it worked out. So we're back at the opening assembly of school and they announce that each year they honor in the sophomore class a sophomore male and a sophomore female who had the highest grade point averages as freshman and they give them a $2K

> academic scholarship for their sophomore year. And they announced this at opening convocation in front of the entire student body. And so they announced the young woman, who I knew, and had been in classes with and thought of her as the smart student. And you know, we were all clapping and then they started reading out the resume of the male. And I'm sitting there, and the football team is sitting together, and I'm sitting there and I'm listening as they're reading out … and then he said, "And the male winner is John Stephens." And all of the football players are like, "What? I didn't know you were smart." And again, I was like, "Really? What I did was special?" I made a 4.0 my first year, which didn't happen at this junior college. And again, it was motivated more out of fear than anything else.

Stephens's award helped him begin to gain confidence as a student. "I'm like, I can do this." Mid-year during his sophomore year Stephens was recruited to a selective liberal arts college in the Southeast to play football. By transferring, Stephens left the junior college before earning his associate's degree. Despite the college's small enrollment, the institution had a well-resourced NCAA Division I football program. Between the time he was recruited and the time he arrived on campus, however, there was a full turnover in the coaching staff. The head coach looked at Stephens before signing his transfer scholarship documents and said, "They gave you this much money? No wonder they were fired." Despite the rocky start, Stephens did well in football, but he struggled personally and academically. "I was way over my head from a social capital standpoint." Stephens struggled to get a 3.0 GPA, and his affluent roommate, a third-generation Kappa Alpha, only exacerbated the disconnect Stephens felt at the school. His

roommate had a regular allowance and traveled to ski in Wyoming, sail in the Virgin Islands, and took his senior fraternity brothers on a cruise to the Caribbean in the three-months' time Stephens lived with him.

Feeling out of place and struggling to pay the one-third of tuition that was not covered by his scholarships, Stephens decided to take a year off. He joined the Navy Reserves for the G.I. Bill's benefits and sold women's shoes at a department store. Unsure of his next step, he reconnected with the coaches from his junior college and hoped to find an opportunity to return to a college and play football. His next step quickly became clear as his old coaches explained:

> Well you're in luck. There's a small school that used to be a junior college and they had a football team then but they dropped it when they became a senior college, but they're adding it back. … And because they're starting their team next year, they're recruiting a sizeable number from junior college because they don't want the whole new class to be all freshmen. … The guy that was doing most of the recruiting had gone to the same junior college and this was his first year out of college, so he had a natural connection with us as well. And he and I hit it off and so he talked me into coming.

Returning to college, Stephens was more mature and had a renewed passion to succeed. "I didn't want to go back to selling shoes," he joked. Stephens excelled academically, and an English professor pulled him aside after a class to let him know his paper was exceptional. The English professor and a history professor joined forces and actively mentored Stephens:

> Much of where I am today is owed to him and his influence and mentorship and pouring himself into me when I didn't deserve it. But he was first-gen and I think he saw something in me that struck a chord, and so he really invested in me and encouraged me to do a lot of other things. … The two of them just took me on as a project and got me opportunities, whether it was a presidential symposium in DC with the first George Bush, or an international study experience … things that I wouldn't have known how to navigate or consider or understood its value, they kept encouraging me to do, and I was curious and open.

As graduation neared, Stephens was contemplating many paths including joining the Peace Corps, becoming a Marine Corps officer, or attending law school, but nothing grabbed his full attention. When a socially minded liberal campus minister asked him if he would be interested in staying after graduation to start a service-learning program, he jumped at the chance despite the low pay:

> I said, "I've got no other plans, so yeah, I'll stick around a couple of years." Two years turned into five and a half and I started the cross-country team and ran the student center and did the volunteer service program and advised students with learning disabilities, you know, just because it was a small shop. And so I would just do here or there, always thinking that at some point I'm going to leave higher ed and go do something else.

Stephens met his wife while on reserve duty with the U.S. Navy, and after working at the university for five years, they decided it was time to leave higher education and head to the West Coast. Stephens was to take over his wife's grandfather's printing company. In the process of driving out west, his wife's grandfather decided not

to transition the company. Instead of running the company, at 30-year-old Stephens found himself going door-to-door to drum up new clients for the family business. Stephens did door-to-door sales for half a year but began looking for positions in higher education. After a few months, he had offers for positions when he got a call from the vice president at his former employer and alma mater. She offered him a position as director of career services but recognized he might not want to relocate back to the Southeast. Because his wife had family on the West Coast, he put her family and needs ahead of his own and declined but thanked her for the offer. When his wife got home and he recounted the story, she responded, “I hope you said yes.” Stephens was initially confused by her response, but his wife recognized that to build a family and own a home they would need to move somewhere with a calmer pace and more affordable cost of living. “So she said call her back in the morning and say yes, and you better damn well hope that position is still—that she hadn’t given it away overnight.” The position was still available and after over a year away, Stephens and his wife were headed back to his alma mater, where he also then began his MBA.

Succeeding in his position, Stephens took on more responsibility within student affairs. He assumed interim roles as the director of residence life and judicial affairs and eventually was promoted to associate dean of students. A new vice president for finance appreciated and trusted Stephens, so he created a position as chief planning officer to help Stephens advance his career and have a greater impact at the university. After the dean of admissions was dismissed due to low enrollment numbers, Stephens filled in for six months while a consultant helped plan the path forward. Stephens excelled in that job as well, and the consultants suggested that Stephens become permanent in the role, which

he accepted. Stephens enjoyed admissions—it allowed him to combine his background with the skills he was learning in his MBA program. He also brought a fresh perspective. "I didn't have all the baggage of this is the way admissions should be done, so I built a pretty good portfolio in admissions. We really started getting some enrollment gains by doing some things differently." Soon Stephens had been asked to also oversee financial aid as well as marketing and communications. When the dean of students left, he was promoted to vice president for student affairs and enrollment management.

Things had been going very well for Stephens in his career at the university, and another institution offered him a $30,000 raise to run their enrollment management division. Around the same time his president told Stephens he needed to get his terminal degree:

> We need to get you an EdD. And he said, "You may end up being vice president for student affairs and enrollment management forever … but with the degree, it becomes your decision and not somebody else's, you know, that you just have some autonomy over your career." And he said, "So let's try to find a program, the university will support you."

Stephens's university could not match the offer from the other institution, but the president's offer of support to help him get his EdD was attractive to Stephens. After consulting with his wife, they decided not to uproot their family but to continue at the university while he worked toward his terminal degree. Stephens secured a spot in a new executive EdD program at a large university in the South that would allow him to continue working full-time and do much of his coursework remotely, though he had given little consideration to his career beyond his current position and the degree:

> Somewhere along the way people started asking me, you know, well what do you want to do with this? And I said, "I don't know," and they were like, "Do you want to be a college president?" And I said, "Well, I never really thought about it."

Stephens imagined himself as president as his current institution, but he did not desire to serve in that role at other institutions. The same president had been there throughout his entire education and career but retired after 23 years. A few members of the board encouraged him to consider applying, but they were clear that the committee was seeking new external vision: "I don't need to think about it, if I—you know, if I don't at least throw my hat in the ring, I'll regret that for the rest of my life." Eventually Stephens won over the committee and was named the next president of the institution. Adjusting to his new role took some getting used to for both Stephens and the university community:

> People have always known me, and the day it was announced I was president, it was like some switch got flipped, that their relationships with me, how I was treated, how I was communicated with, changed overnight. And it's easy for that to become about your ego, but it was so clear to me it was about the title. You know, the day before nobody cared if I was in a meeting … half of what I said got ignored. … my ideas were so much better three days later … That's one of those things that the first-gen can ground you a bit if you can hang on to it, because it's an indulged title. … It helps to hang on to it and when you think about what families are worried about or what they're thinking about or—what their hopes are.

His first-generation background and humble beginnings helped Stephens keep perspective despite his change in roles and new level of influence on campus. It was also his first-generation roots that helped him become a president by saying yes to each opportunity. From deciding where to start his college career with community input, to coaching the cross-country team, to moving across country and back, Stephens always said yes:

> When presented with an opportunity, the answer should always be yes. And that was something that wasn't a plan, but looking back I recognized I benefited from, you know, when somebody said, "Do you want to be the cross-country coach?" I didn't know a damn thing about coaching cross country, but I was like, "Yeah. That sounds fun." And now I have a deep understanding of athletics.

His knowledge of athletics was useful when he took on the role of president. He continued saying yes when opportunities presented themselves at each step. "Every time I got restless, it was almost as if someone knew 'it's time to give John another challenge' or something." His willingness to say yes helped him secure his own creative path to the presidency. As for his priorities ahead, Stephens recognizes the institution has work to do. He desires to help the university find a way to continue to be true to its roots as an access institution but also create space on campus for students who come to college highly prepared ready for academic rigor. Stephens also recognizes his institution will not be able to maintain its current 37% enrollment of Pell-eligible students if they wish to remain financially solvent long-term. He plans to figure out a way to lower the percentage of Pell-eligible students without shifting away from the mission of the place that changed his own life. When thinking about the remainder of his career and what

could be next, Stephens made it clear he has found his dream job and although he is not a betting man, he cannot imagine much else. Then again, Stephens never imagined himself as a college president:

> I'm the last person to predict what the future holds, but I can't imagine being better suited for any place than I am here. I have a lifetime of credibility built up, the faculty here trust me. They may not always agree with me, but I think they know my motivation and my intention. And as you know, that's not always a healthy relationship. I think they know I'm not going to do anything here that I don't believe makes the enterprise better. … So yeah, I would hope that at some point they would give me a nice going-away party and they would feel good about my contribution.

Individual Themes from Dr. Stephens's Story

This college's president. Stephens did not set out to be a college president, nor was it ever in his professional goals. However, it was his connection to a specific institution that changed his mind. "At some point, I said to someone, 'I'm not sure I want to be a college president, but this place changed my life. You know, I wouldn't mind being this college's president. This is personal for me.'" Stephens's connection to his alma mater and the place he now presides over is deep, meaningful, and, as he said, personal. He understands the institution better than anyone. His unique experiences and personal connection to the institution prepared him in distinct ways for his role. Whereas many other college presidents in this study prepared and did a national search, Stephens did not. He worked hard and took advantage of all opportunities to make his alma mater a

better place. “It’s almost like I was preparing to be a president all along and had no idea that’s what I was preparing to be.”

Not only does Stephens understand the university better than anyone else, he also recognizes its strengths, weaknesses, and the role it plays in the crowded college market. “I understand our market position. … I’m not competing with prestigious private colleges for their band of students. I know that hardworking, above-average, maybe not stellar SAT but aspirant student is our sweet spot.” Stephens attributes his clear and unparalleled understanding of his institution to his first-generation background. He shared an example of a time a faculty member asked him how frequently he talks about liberal arts with prospective students and their families:

> I said, “Not one minute.” … I said, “Most every family that comes in the door, if I said we were a liberal arts institution, the family would say, we’re neither liberal nor are we interested in the arts.” … I’d spend 30 minutes unpacking what we mean by liberal arts. A family that walks in the door at the nearby highly selective liberal arts college doesn’t need to be explained what liberal arts is…. our families are like, is my son going to get a job when he graduates from your institution? Yeah. And so I think those are practical ways that being a first-gen has helped me and that I understand our audience, or at least a sizeable portion of our audience, the core part of the students we serve.

What was most memorable from my meeting with Stephens was the intense belief he has in the institution that has shaped his life in immeasurable ways:

> What we do matters, you know. What we do changes the world. I don’t know that I would be as curious about this if there wasn’t at least my perceived value in

> what we do. And again, that's where it become[s] a personal story that this place changed the entire trajectory of my life. And so to be able to pay that forward, being a part of doing that for another generation, that's just really cool.

Community as a resiliency tool. Stephens always dreamed of getting out of his hometown. "I don't know if you know or are familiar with the film, *Breaking Away*… about cyclists.… He's a dreamer—always thought of that guy, dreamed of myself at a French café somewhere instead of my hometown." Despite his desire to get out of his hometown, it was his hometown and the community in it that helped him launch and succeed. He relied on his community to make decisions, particularly before he knew how college worked. He spoke about going to a junior college at the suggestion of his father's friend and about allowing folks in his community to help him make decisions. Like other participants, Stephens spoke of individual mentors who helped him navigate unknown terrain. Beyond individuals, however, he also spoke of the way he values community. It is his meager beginnings and the very community that he tried so desperately to get out of that still ground Stephens. Although he does not miss his hometown, he strives regularly to never forget where he came from and what his community taught him:

> I don't ever want to lose that, because it's easy. I make a crazy amount of money for people who come from where I do, and people wash my car, and you know, it's—that was fascinating to me. I think if I had been named president of another college and had gone there and people had treated me the way they do college presidents, I would have thought that I was something special.

Stephens made it. At times his community was his greatest support and at other times it was his greatest antagonist. But he succeeded in getting out of his hometown and

he created a successful life for himself and his family. Departing his hometown, however, does not come without challenges, particularly for someone who places a high value on community. “Some of my guilt is related to I don’t get back much… not appreciating that that shaped me enough, that there was a—some survivor’s guilt associated with it. I made it out.”

Dr. Joseph Thompson

President Thompson’s campus is the largest among the candidates in the study, so I was surprised when his assistant responded to my request for him to participate. Many presidents at public institutions either did not respond or responded saying their schedules would not allow them to participate. Thompson’s assistant, however, rearranged a meeting so that I would be able to meet with him while I was in the area for other interviews. I have a friend who works on his campus, and prior to my research my friend had described the president as a steady leader who is very level-headed. His description proved to be accurate.

As I drove to campus, I longed to be driving to another small private institution where I would not have to worry about parking passes, complicated campus directions, or large parking garages. I had been on Thompson’s campus a year prior, however, doing another research project, so I was comfortable navigating it. I arrived early and parked in the large parking structure adjacent to the administration building that housed Thompson’s office. The admissions operations ran out of the building as well and school was in session, so the tour-guides were abuzz leading groups of prospective students and their families in and out of the building with great enthusiasm. I walked up to the second floor of the building that housed the executive suite, and unlike my previous institutions I

was not warmly greeted by name by an administrative assistant dedicated to supporting the president. I was greeted by a young woman who appeared to be about 23 or 24 who asked how she could assist me. Her role was not to manage his schedule but only to staff the front desk. She managed the many visitors who came and went in the executive suite. She instructed me to have a seat and notified President Thompson that I was ready.

A few minutes later Thompson walked out and greeted me. He shook my hand and asked if I was comfortable with his ACE fellow joining us for the interview. I was surprised that with a participant pool of just nine presidents that two were serving as mentors to ACE fellows. It seemed like a testament that these individuals were committed to fostering others' growth, potentially a reason they also agreed to participate in the study. I shared with him I was happy to have the fellow join, provided Thompson was comfortable with him in the room. He responded "great" and we walked back to his office. He asked me to sit at the large table in his corner office with windows flanking two sides of the space. The building was designed and decorated as I had imagined—consistent with other state institutions I had attended or visited. Higher-end furniture filled the office, but each piece was likely still within the state purchasing parameters. Like other presidents, his office had a sitting area, a large desk, and a table or conference area, all within one large space. I sat at the table and moments later he returned with his ACE fellow to begin the interview.

Two Out of Three: President Thompson's Story

Despite being a first-generation college student, Thompson had the privilege of following in his brother's footsteps. His older brother had gone to college and was very intelligent. His younger brother did not attend college and earned a living as an auto

mechanic. What impressed me most about Thompson is the way in which he reflected on what his life could have been if he had not gone to college, found mentors, and taken the path that he did. His younger brother was a constant reminder of what his life could have been if he had made different choices. Despite their different levels of achievement, Thompson talked about both of his brothers with affection. When I asked about what his brothers were doing in their careers today, the tenor of our conversation became somber:

> [My younger brother] passed away about two years ago, but he lived the kind of life you would have associated with someone who would not have the advantages of having a college degree. If I had not gotten my degree, I would have been a car mechanic like my brother, I would have smoked like my brother and died prematurely like my brother. A college degree made a huge lifestyle impact. My older brother went off, actually became a faculty member for a while in Canada. Ended up settling at a prestigious laboratory where he converted himself into being a computer scientist.

Thompson's story demonstrates the value of a college degree beyond career opportunities and earning potential. It demonstrates how lives can be improved and extended through education.

Joseph Thompson is a 66-year old White man who serves as president for a large public research university in the Southeast. This is Thompson's second presidency, and previous to his current role he served as president of a large state university in the Mountain States. Thompson earned his undergraduate from a mid-sized public institution on the West Coast and his master's and PhD from a large, public flagship university in

the Midwest. Thompson shared that approximately 40% of the students at his institution are first-generation college students.

Thompson grew up in a middle-class household on the West Coast. He was the middle child of three boys and his family lived in a modest 1200 square foot home. Thompson's parents desired to attend college but could not afford to do so. Despite not attending college, his mother eventually took college-level stenography and other business-related courses and worked in white-collar positions. Thompson's older brother was "extremely brilliant, I mean precociously brilliant" and went to a prestigious public university near their home. It was expected that Thompson would also attend college. However, his brother's institution was highly liberal and engaged in many free speech activities related to the Vietnam war protests, so his parents discouraged him from attending the same university; they were supportive of his choice of a state institution 90 miles from their home. Thompson did not consider attending college out of state, and it was likely not financially feasible. His parents, despite their lack of college education, had secure careers. Thompson's father held white-collar roles in the newspaper industry, public relations, and eventually in aviation. Throughout childhood his family never traveled, and he remembered, "I never got to go on the high school ski trips because they didn't have the dollars to put me on the trip… It just wasn't in the cards." He also recalled a time when his high school girlfriend invited him to a nice dinner with her family who came from an affluent background. "It just did not occur to me to ask my parents to let me go buy a new shirt for that. It just was not in the way we lived." Despite financial challenges growing up, by the time he attended college, his family's income

was high enough to make him ineligible for financial aid. His parents agreed to help pay for college but made it clear to him he must finish in eight semesters.

Thompson graduated high school with a 3.0 GPA and considered himself a "very average kind of student." In his first semester of college he did similarly, but within in a year's time he "just figured it out" and he achieved a 4.0 his second year and each semester thereafter. Thompson was a "good talker" and many in his family believed he would be a good lawyer. He agreed with their perspective and all of his undergraduate plans were focused on law school. Thompson majored in political science and focused on legal studies. Throughout college he played intramural sports and came home on weekends to participate in sea scouting, something he had done throughout high school and for which he had become a junior officer while in college. He spent summers at home working a variety of jobs. "I was a parking lot attendant at the airport and I repaired vending machines, and you know, really—and hung around with a lot of really hardworking people, but they were not the white-collar crowd."

Due to his academic success in college, Thompson was invited early in his junior year to participate in an honors thesis program at his university:

> I was invited to do an honor's thesis. And what you did at the time was have one faculty member mentor you through basically what turned out to be a 12-credit-hour course because it took three academic quarters to complete the honors thesis. And so I ended up working with this faculty member who was a comparative political science person and I think I'd taken a course from him. So, I approached him about doing this and he was delighted, so I wrote a senior honors thesis. And

it took the full year and it was a comparative analysis of the societal treatment of American African Americans versus South African Black citizens.

Thompson enjoyed writing his thesis and actively researched for months. He produced a 200-page document that earned him an A+. Because of his success in the scholarly endeavor, Thompson's advisor encouraged him to consider graduate school. "He could see I was really interested in research." After some challenging pre-law classes, Thompson's interest in law school had waned, so he decided to take his mentor's advice and pursue graduate school. Thompson's new career goal was to become a professor, although he admitted he "didn't really know what the lifestyle of a professor would be like… didn't realize the pay would be so bad, and you know, the other things that went along with an academic career." By this time, his brother had completed his PhD in mathematics, so although he was unsure what pursuing a terminal degree would be like, his brother could provide an informed perspective. Thompson was unsure of how to decide which university to attend, but when he got an offer for an assistantship at a reputable university in the Midwest, his decision was made for him. Thompson had never been outside of California, but he packed up his Volkswagen beetle and drove almost 2000 miles to begin graduate school.

Thompson did well in his graduate program and earned approval to advance from master's to doctoral with full funding. While in his doctoral program, he also met his wife, who was in law school at the same university. After completing his course work and starting his dissertation, Thompson began getting low on money. He accepted a tenure-track position back at his undergraduate institution prior to finishing his dissertation. His wife had gotten permission to finish her final law school classes back at

her husband's alma mater and would receive her degree from the large university in the Midwest upon completion of coursework and exams. Thompson noted that his new role would result in him "being paid, $13,300. I mean, it was huge. That was huge." Thompson's teaching load was substantial and varied. He taught large lecture courses on American government and public law with first-year students while supervising many teaching assistants of upper-level legal courses that averaged 75–100 students. At just 25 years old, Thompson recounted wearing a coat and tie every day to establish a classroom presence while internally struggling with being overworked. He was trying to find his niche in the lonely world of a faculty member. "I didn't have a lot in common anymore with 17-year olds or 18-year olds, but I also didn't have a lot in common with my colleagues."

After two years of teaching, during which time he finished his dissertation, an advertisement to be a judicial fellow in the U.S. Federal Court piqued Thompson's interest. He applied, was selected, and moved to Washington, DC, on one-year's leave from his university to do research for the federal court. Despite the role paying him more than twice what he was earning as a faculty member, "the work wasn't really interesting" and Thompson returned to his role at the university. He was making great progress as a rising academic. "The political science faculty were starting to get worried I was going to look elsewhere so I was accelerated up the academic ranks pretty quickly." Despite getting promoted, Thompson was still getting bored with his role. He applied for a half-time administrative appointment at his university that would allow him to be the faculty assistant to the chief student affairs and academic affairs officers:

> I don't know a lick about it, but it sounded interesting and I could do it half time and teach half time and continue my advancement up the ranks. Because I knew I had to get to full professor; you couldn't do anything without full professor.

Thompson enjoyed the position, and after staffing changes that left the assistant vice chancellor role open and at the encouragement of the vice chancellor to apply, Thompson took on the new role. He started out doing the role half time while teaching the other half of his time, which continued until he was promoted to full professor. After promotion, Thompson moved to 80% administration and 20% faculty. He was in the role for 10 years and was promoted from assistant to associate vice chancellor during that decade. When the vice chancellor retired, Thompson applied, but at just 38 years old was not selected. Despite not being selected, he had found his forte and would continue to explore other chief academic officer positions:

> I loved university administration. I just found it so much more interesting than my faculty work alone. I mean, oh, I love my research, I'm really good at it, and I was still publishing. I just love the problem solving that went along with university administration. It was also a much more social activity than I was used to as a member of the faculty. I knew so many more people around the university after I became an administrator.

When a new vice chancellor was selected, Thompson enjoyed working for her and she was a strong mentor to him. She supported him in finding a deanship or provost position. During that time, Thompson also talked with the executive vice chancellor about his lack of administrative experience in an academic college because his leadership

roles had all been university-wide. The executive vice chancellor had just the solution to help Thompson get additional experience and be more marketable:

> He created a job for me in the largest academic college and I became the executive associate dean for one year under the new dean who couldn't budget his way out of a paper bag and had basically bankrupted the college.

The college-level administrative experience helped. At just 40 years old, Thompson was selected as the chief academic officer at a large public university in the Southeast that was looking to build its doctoral programs, something he had been part of at his previous institution. Thompson's new president was a mentor to him, just as his vice chancellor had been at his previous institution. They both invested heavily in Thompson's success:

> They dedicated themselves to making sure I had the kind of experience I would need to either become a vice chancellor at a bigger institution or a president or a chancellor someday. And the president would do things like take me to NCAA meetings, so I would have some exposure to athletics.

Their investment in Thompson reaped quick rewards. Within five years he got a phone call asking if he "was ready to be a college president?" Thompson relished his provost role and enjoyed raising his children in the city. He had not considered being a president, nor was he looking to leave, but the idea intrigued him. The position Thompson got a call about was a large state university in the Mountain States. He followed his interests, and after five and a half years as chief academic officer, he was selected as president at just 46 years old. Thompson enjoyed the variety his new role provided and stayed there for eight years. However, it was a challenging role and a

challenging time for the local economy in the state. In addition, the role required high levels of interaction to lobby legislators in the state. Thompson expected this to be part of his role, but the complicated politics of the state required more of him than most state university presidents. Over the course of one year, Thompson was "gone for 100 nights and that was not easy with a young family." Despite the challenges, Thompson was well-regarded and had just renewed his contract when the president at his previous institution announced his retirement. Thompson was intrigued at the opportunity to succeed the man he held in high esteem in a city that was better suited for his family but to which he had not imagined returning:

> I never really thought it would be all that possible to return because, you know, if you have done your job right [as provost] and made the tough but difficult decisions, most of the time you're despised by the faculty by the time you leave. But I had actually done a really good job here and had really a lot of faculty following. So, in fact one of the members of the board of trustees actually flew out to try to persuade me to apply.

It did not take much convincing for Thompson to apply— things had changed abruptly for him. "The governor changed, the board was getting kind of squirrely. We were spending a lot of time sort of babysitting board members." Again Thompson applied for just one position and at 55 he was selected to return to a campus he had left eight years earlier to take on his second college presidency. Returning to a campus he already knew well "turned out to be the right choice … every step we took was at the right time for the right reasons." Returning to the institution as president has given Thompson the opportunity to build on his predecessor's success. Since arriving as president, he has

helped the institution build $1.2B worth of buildings, start a football program, open an urban satellite campus, and add nine additional doctoral programs.

After two decades of being a college president, the path ahead remains uncertain for Thompson:

> My wife says I can do one more presidency, but I really don't want to. It's the same process of meeting new people over and over and over again. So, I'll probably—the way I think of it right now is I need to finish our campaign, which is a $200M campaign, which is going to run through calendar year 2020. And then I've got to decide if I want to keep doing this. By then, I'll be 70. Maybe just do consulting or do something else. We'll see.

Individual Themes from President Thompson

The steady president. Having been a college president for over two decades, little surprises or shocks Thompson. My friend who works on his campus described him as steady, and after our interview, I could not have picked a better word to describe the way he approaches his role. Thompson highly values emotional intelligence which has helped him as president:

> I hire good people, try to let them do their jobs, don't get too up or down about almost anything anymore, and try to have the best information in front of me when it comes to making a decision. Then make the decision and move on. If you have to revisit a decision because the data convinces you that what you thought would happen didn't happen, you can go do that, but I don't spend a lot of time looking backwards.

Thompson noted, “I used to be a little bit of a hothead as a kid. But as an adult, I’ve always worked well with people … so I’m calmer and more balanced and maybe more inclusive today.” Thompson noted other benefits of his maturity as a campus executive, including a calm demeanor, being a good listener, not making decisions in isolation, and being interested in the welfare of faculty. “If you go into a job like this and you aren’t paying attention and you’re just charging ahead, you don’t build any capital.”

College access and completion. Throughout Thompson’s career, his first-generation status has helped him understand the life-changing value of a college degree. His first-generation identity has helped him connect with families while engaging them in the ways a degree can change their lives:

> I don’t think about my first-generation college status as something I had to overcome. I just didn’t think of it in that way. I think now it’s useful to say to people that I know, in my heart, that I had I not gotten a college degree it would have been a different life. … When I talk to students about it, I tell them to look at the data about college degrees—more annual income, more lifetime income, better health, more likely to vote and be philanthropic, less likely to be in trouble with the law, less likely to be on social welfare. I mean, the data speak volumes about college degrees no matter what generation you’re coming from. So I talk about that more in the spirit of “you’re doing the right thing, you’re going to college, you need to finish.”

Thompson also recognizes his perspective comes with responsibility. Specifically, he feels responsible for creating ways to make college more affordable so that all students can continue to have access to a degree to improve all aspects of their lives:

> Lots of very able people with tons of potential will be excluded from a career like I had if we can't find a way to help them pay for their college education.… When we sit down every year to think about where our tuition and fees are going to be raised … we're conscious of what it costs people. Because of the way I grew up, I'm very aware of that.

Chapter Summary

Chapter 4 introduced the individual narratives of the nine college presidents who participated in this narrative inquiry. The chapter identified the unique pathway to the presidency for each participant, outlining how each participant cultivated their own aspirations and preparedness to be a college president. It also highlighted the nine individual accounts of overcoming educational and career barriers as well as the unique ways in which each college presidents who was a first-generation student approaches their role. Chapter 5 will highlight the themes that emerged across the nine narratives.

CHAPTER 5

THEMES ACROSS NARRATIVES

> As a first-gen college student, I grew up drilled in the lifestyle perspective that success is all about your own hard work. Nobody gives you anything for nothing, and if they do, beware! Distrust praise, if possible, avoid it. Praise only distracts you from an accurate and pragmatic assessment of your effort forward. (Durden, 2013, p. 48)

Humility and an unwavering commitment to hard work were two common perspectives articulated by participants that helped them transcend barriers. Their accounts echoed Durden's experience that highlighted the ways his family reinforced first-generation values. Four distinct themes emerged from the data including (1) mentors, (2) transcending educational and career obstacles, (3) presidential pathways, and (4) approach as first-generation presidents. Chapter 5 will identify the collective profile of the nine participants in the study and will identify the four themes that emerged from the data in detail. Themes are described and supported by excerpts from interviews with participants. For some themes, multiple trends and perspectives emerged from the data and are explained in detail within that theme. Consistent with anti-deficit achievement framework (Harper, 2010), the focus of the interviews was on how participants overcame barriers and defied the dominant narrative of underperformance for first-generation students and backgrounds of privilege for college presidents (Brown-Nagin, 2014; Espino, 2012).

Profile of Participants

Of the nine participants, two identified racially as Black or African American and seven identified as White, Caucasian, or Irish-American. One participant was a woman and eight were men. Seven of the nine were first-time presidents and two were on their second presidency. The average age of participants was 57 and the average age at which participants became president was 51. Three participants hold Doctor of Education degrees, five hold Doctor of Philosophy degrees, and one holds a Juris Doctorate. Four public school presidents are represented and five private school presidents. Three presidents oversaw baccalaureate institutions, three oversaw master's institutions, one oversaw a doctoral institution, and two oversaw community colleges. Of the six institutions that had readily accessible data on their first-generation student population, the average percentage of first-generation students was 41%. Table 1 outlines each participant's' demographic information and Table 2 provides an overview of the themes that emerged from the data. The themes are arranged by how they answer the research questions and are discussed in detail throughout Chapter 5. The theme of mentors transcended each of the research questions, and it was therefore identified as a separate theme.

Table 1. Participant Profiles

Participant	Gen	Race/ Ethnicity	Degree	Age	Age Became Pres	Current Institution Type	% First-Generation Students
Wright	M	African American	JD	62	55	Public Masters	30-35%
Murray	M	White	EdD	56	53	Private Baccalaureate	Unknown

Scott	M	Caucasian	EdD	52	49	Public Comm College	33%
Ideye	M	Black	PhD	62	54	Public Comm College	Approx 60%
Kearney	M	Irish American	PhD	51	48	Private Baccalaureate	Unknown
Jennings	W	White	PhD	59	58	Private Masters	40%
Cook	M	White	PhD	55	47	Private Baccalaureate	Unknown
Stephens	M	Caucasian	EdD	52	50	Private Masters	33-44%
Thompson	M	Caucasian	PhD	66	46	Public Doctoral	40%

Table 2. Themes

Mentors	Power of Suggestion
	Opportunities for Career Discernment & Advancement
	Seeking Mentors & Giving Back

Transcend Career & Ed Obstacles	Demeanor	*Curiosity*
		Humility
		Perspective taking
		Transparency/genuineness
	Family & Community	*Communal decision making*
		Uninformed support
		Immigrant perspectives
	Approach to Problem Solving	*Past strengths*
		Native intelligence
		No-nonsense persona
		Navigate insider/outsider
		Relationship with work

Accidental Pathways to Presidency	Flexibility in Career Decision-Making & Prof. Development
	Entrepreneurial Approach
	Planned Happenstance

First-Gen Approaches as President	Student are Top Priority
	Invest in People & Relationships
	Mission Matters

Theme One: Mentors

> "Mr. Stephens, do you mind sticking around for a second?" And I did and so we started talking and he said, "Who are you, where'd you come from, what's your story?" And we started talking and he said, "This paper is outstanding." He said, "It's really good, have you thought about being an English major?" And he ended up becoming my mentor, my advisor, you name it. … Much of where I am today is owed to him and his influence and mentorship and pouring himself into me when I didn't deserve it. But he was first-gen from the South and I think he saw something in me that struck a chord and so he really invested in me and encouraged me to do a lot of other things

As Stephens identified while describing a professor who took a strong interest in him, mentors played a vital role in participants' experiences and successes. Across all nine of the interviews, participants identified mentors as the strongest influences in their progress, success, aspirations, ability to transcend obstacles, and approach to their roles as presidents. As Wright stated, "At different points in my life there's always somebody who pushed some button that moved you along." Ideye echoed Wright's sentiment. "I've been very, very fortunate to meet people along the way that believed in me, that have been willing to guide me. Even [when things] didn't turn out well, I had people that took chance on me." Mentors were often individuals in position of power and older than the participants at the time they developed a mentoring relationship, and consistent with literature, mentors often served the purpose of developing self-confidence and self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997; Espino, 2014; Harper, 2010). However, not all mentors were individuals in positions of power. As Kearney explained about an upperclassman who

helped him persist at a highly selective liberal arts college where he did not feel he belonged:

> I got to know him through my brother and he was an incredible source of confidence and inspiration and support. … I became lifelong friends with him and he was amazing. He was brilliant—brilliant scholar, brilliant mind. And so, he was great, especially early on at giving me confidence, making you believe that, yeah, anything is—you can do anything, anything is possible, just keep doing it, right?

Many participants identified one or more mentors by name who actively and regularly were part of their educational and career experiences pushing them to achieve. Some did not find an individual mentor but had many individuals in their life who nudged them. Murray articulated how mentoring impacts first-generation students:

> First-gen students who might have an interest in advancing in a higher ed career, presidency or elsewhere, they have to find mentors to help … and I didn't really find that, but I did find one person who said, "I believe you have the gift to do this."

Throughout the theme of mentoring, three distinct trends emerged. The first was the power of suggestion, which Murray outlined. The second was opportunities for career discernment and advancement, highlighting the ways mentors helped participants identify career aspirations and advancement opportunities. The third trend in this theme included seeking mentors and giving back, which outlined the ways in which participants sought out mentors and mentored others.

The Power of Suggestion

> So I think the first time I realized that I could do the work was I made an A in freshman English. … She said, "Congratulations, you made an A in my class. people rarely do that." And I was like, "Really?" She was like, "Yeah, you're a good student." It was the first time somebody had said that to me.

Stephens's account exemplified how mentors impacted participants, by helping them see their own strengths and pushing them to achieve goals beyond those they set for themselves. Mentors regularly assisted participants to build confidence and saw things in their mentees that they did not see in themselves. The mentoring resulted in opportunities for career discernment and advancement. Mentors consisted of coaches, counselors, teachers, and student affairs professionals but mostly they were professors who pushed participants beyond their own expectations As first-generation students without a sense of their own intelligence in comparison to others, multiple participants stated that mentors were the first person to bring attention to participants' strengths. Similar to Stephens's account, Wright accounted the first time a mentor helped him realize his own intelligence. "When I was in the 8th grade, the school principal told me that I had scored the highest of the kids in my class."

Mentors were identified as individuals who helped participants overcome their own internal obstacles to achievement, consistent with attribution theory (Weiner, 1985), which serves as a theoretical influence on Harper's anti-deficit achievement model (2010). A mentor of Murray's encouraged him to pursue an advanced degree and a teaching assistantship due to his academic success as an undergraduate. "[She] said, 'You should try to be a teaching assistant, you could do that.' And you know applying for the

master's program and I did … it took just one person saying a few words." For Cook, it was his mentor who helped him persevere by actively pushing him and holding him to high academic standards. Cook stated his mentor was the first person who helped him realize he "can do this whole PhD thing." Cook explained:

> He pushed me really, really hard. He's the hardest teacher I've ever had, myself, as a student. And pushed me along that path. … He just saw something in me that, quite honestly, I didn't see in myself. When I started on the path to go back to school, it was that I wanted to teach but I really thought I'd get a master's degree and teach at a community college somewhere.

Mentoring continued as participants began their careers after finishing their degrees. Mentors brought out the potential in participants and allowed them to see themselves running universities (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Oyserman, Grant, & Ager, 1995). Participants' accounts were consistent with the constructs of possible selves theory, which serves as a theoretical basis for Harper's anti-deficit achievement model (2010). Scott had an experience early in his career that helped him see himself in leadership:

> When I had that first job working [in industry], my boss told me that I was going to be a president someday. She said, "I don't know where you're going to be a president or what you're going to be a president of, but you're going to be a president someday." And I was stupefied at that point by the comment and why do you say that, what makes you think that? And now looking back on it, maybe she saw something that I cannot recognize in myself.

Although Scott's mentor made a simple suggestion that gave him permission to begin seeing himself in leadership, for others it took more encouragement or coaxing. Ideye recounted a mentor who was also a president of the institution where he worked as chief academic officer:

> He was the person that kept telling me, you're going to be a president someday. I kept saying to him, "I don't want to be a president. I love working with faculty, I love working with students, I love curriculum issues." He said, "You can do more than that." That's what he kept telling me. He said, "You can do more than that."

As they began to see themselves as presidents, participants explained it was mentors that encouraged them to seek higher career aspirations. For Wright, it was a mentor who continually asked about his next career steps. He remembered a distinct moment that his mentor pushed him to consider moving from law school admissions to running a law school. "He says, 'Okay, what's your next job?' I'm like, 'What are you talking about? I've got a good job.' … 'Well, you can be dean of the law school.'" The power of suggestion also worked for Thompson, when after just five years in his role as provost, he received encouragement to pursue the presidency. "I got a call from a colleague.… She said, 'Are you ready to be a college president?' And that's the very first time I started—sort of began thinking about what was the next step for me going to be?"

Opportunities for Career Discernment and Advancement

In addition to helping participants realize their own intelligence and abilities, the power of suggestion from mentors helped many participants choose career paths that fit their strengths and passions. Jennings recounted how her mentor asked a question that helped her decide to pursue a career in higher education. "'Andrea, did it ever occur to

you that you might not want to leave the college environment?' And you know, what senior isn't thinking that? And I said, 'Yes, I said I think about that every day.'" Jennings's mentor accompanied her home to visit her family and help them understand this career path. Later in her career, Jennings spent over three decades at the same institution, and it was mentors who continually pushed and promoted her. She ascended from director of residence life to interim president over a three-decade career at an institution. At each step mentors opened doors and helped her build her confidence and self-efficacy.

Many provided concrete career advice to participants, and at times opened doors for participants to advance professionally. Wright identified how his mentor in law school helped him launch his career in higher education by creating a position for him. "I was working as an intern with the public defender's office in Milwaukee after my second year of law school, he offered me a job half-time graduate assistantship doing minority recruitment for the law school." For many participants the presidents they worked under became mentors and helped shape their career by offering them opportunities to advance. For many participants that included being interim presidents or taking on additional responsibility. Murray described his experience:

> Mostly I filled in for the president. So, if he couldn't go to an athletic conference meeting, I was there, that kind of thing. So, I really got the feel for being president and he positioned it in a way that I think maybe was a little difficult for the other members of the senior staff. They didn't know if I was subordinate to them or above them in the org chart. It didn't matter, I just helped him do his work.

For Stephens, it was his president who pushed him to earn his terminal degree, shaping his career for years to come:

> The president said to me, "You know, we need to get you an EdD." And he said, "You may end up being vice president for student affairs and enrollment management forever," he said, "but with the degree, it becomes your decision and not somebody else's, you know, that you just have some autonomy over your career." And he said, "So let's try to find a program, the university will support you."

Seeking Mentors and Giving Back

Throughout their education and careers, participants grew to understand the benefit of mentoring and often sought it out themselves. In addition, they took on mentees or roles so that they could give back in the ways that mentors had done for them. Kearney identified the way in which he selected and sought out a mentor in college:

> I loved philosophy. He inspired me. He was a solid guy. He was somebody that I thought would be worthwhile emulating and, so he was—not by what anything—he was an unbelievable teacher and so I loved his class, incredibly challenging classes, but he was also somebody that I—you know, I said, if I could have that much enthusiasm for life, that would be a good thing.

Wright recalled looking up to the dean of admissions at the university where he got his law degree, a fellow Black man. Absent the opportunity to interact with him regularly, Wright now actively sought out his mentorship—a relationship that would later open many doors for Wright:

> I'm sitting there and I'm thinking, okay, the letter of admission I got had his signature at the bottom of it. The financial aid letter that I got that gave me a grant that paid my tuition and gave me some grant money above that that made law school affordable had his signature at the bottom. … And it struck me that I had not gone by to see him or said anything. So, I said, "Okay," so I go see him.

Wright's decision to forge a relationship opened many doors for him but also allowed him to have a mentor who looked like him for the first time. For Ideye, when he became a president he strategically sought out fellow presidents in his community college system for support. "These are people that have been in the system for a long time. I meet with them often. When I have issues here that I don't understand, I call them."

Participants often served as mentors to give back to others. Cook identified that he mentored a few individual students each year, and others talked about helping first-generation students and peers advance in their career. Participants' commitment to mentoring was demonstrated by the two participants who hosted fellows during our interviews. Participants felt a sense of duty and commitment to their mentors. For Jennings, her allegiance was reflected in her decision to push herself to pursue a presidency to honor her mentors:

> I sort of reached the point—I don't have to do this. I have a great career, I could stay where I was and that would have been comfortable. It was more the sense of who will lead these institutions that really inspired me … and I felt that people had invested in me. … They sort of took a risk on a pretty young professional that, you know, now I should.

The role mentors played in fostering participant's own sense of self, their persistence, and success cannot be understated. As Ideye stated, "Without those people really building me up, without those people really telling me all the things that I can do, without those people giving me the opportunity, I would never be the president I am today." Stephens echoed Ideye's sentiment by reflecting on the role mentors played in his career. "A lot of help along the way… some mentor, some person took a little bit of interest and [went] way beyond the call of duty and that made all the difference."

Theme Two: Transcending Education and Career Obstacles

> I can remember playing sports and practicing and stuff and being like nah, I can't be a professor. But at each step along the way, you try it and you come out having done it, and then, you know, you teach a couple of courses as an adjunct and the responses were really favorable.

In his opening excerpt, Kearney explained how he went from being an uncertain undergraduate interested in athletics to building confidence and becoming an effective professor. His account exemplified one of many ways participants transcended obstacles in their education and career. Throughout this theme there were three distinct trends in the data including demeanor, family and community, and approach to problem solving.

Demeanor

Throughout the data, the participants articulated and demonstrated consistent personality traits and abilities that gave them a distinctive demeanor. They were curious and humble individuals who were able to take perspective easily. Transparency and genuineness were key values that were also reflected in their demeanors. This unique combination of traits and abilities equipped participants to transcend barriers and

obstacles in distinctive ways. Kearney shared a detailed example of how these aspects of his demeanor intersected when faced with a crisis on his campus:

> We had an attack here a couple of months ago, a guy came—a former student came back with a bag full of knives and machete and tried to—he attacked students and stuff. I was coming from my car right there and students were running out of the café and they're screaming and running, and I was like—somebody said this man has a hatchet. I was like a hatchet, that's only that big, so I took off running towards it and got there just as our police chief was trying to handcuff. He couldn't get it so I got the handcuffs on with the police chief and people were like, you went towards? But, after that it was like, oh, the president—and then people were like thinking—I was like, I'm not talking about this. And then remember my brother does that stuff every [day] … he and then other people do this stuff every day with real consequences.

Having a brother who is a first-responder helped Kearney take perspective. He did not recognize his behavior as risking his own life but rather he saw it as doing what needed to be done as a leader. Kearney's curiosity, willingness to take risks, and humility helped him in this instance, and his combination of traits and abilities was common among participants. The four distinct trends within the theme of demeanor included curiosity, humility, perspective-taking, and transparency and genuineness. Each is detailed below.

Curiosity. There was a deep internal curiosity that pushed participants to explore concepts, ideas, and life opportunities. Their curiosity helped them explore majors and college activities, graduate school in states that were far from home, and a variety of

interests that helped prepare them to be presidents. Jennings recounted the excitement of flying on a plane for the first time. Thompson noted he had not been outside of his home state until graduate school. For others, an internal curiosity pushed them to study subjects outside of expectations. Wright recounted his curiosity at a young age:

> That was 8th grade … there was a whole range of things that I would be curious about or didn't understand or wanted to … [they] would say well go to the library. So I was always reading stuff. People I hadn't seen in years would say, "Yeah, you were always reading something."

For Jennings, her curiosity led her to explore opportunities for career advancement outside of her own campus, an experience that later helped her secure a presidency that had academic programs outside of her experience or expertise but within her interests:

> Whenever there were opportunities for a broader experience, I tried to take them … I decided to get involved in the accreditation visits and for probably over 20 years I was on accreditation teams because I thought that would get me outside of my own institution. And I found that to be invaluable to talk to faculty at other institutions… And then I was on two sort of healthcare boards … those proved to be very beneficial because [my institution] never had nursing or healthcare, but [this place] does. … So, in areas where I didn't have the background … I could say, "Yeah, I'm familiar with this, I've been on the boards of these organizations."

Humility. Many participants not only requested I call them by their first names but they noted that they make the same request of their own campus communities.

Murray tied his desire to go by a shortened version of his first name to the humility that he believed was innate in his first-generation identity:

> This may be a first gen thing, much more humility. The—I don't feel entitled to any of the things that go with the presidency and I've had to get used to people calling me President Murray, those kinds of things. I don't ask—on campus, I ask to be called Andy and—but, you know, I'll speak at a community event or whatever it might be where people call me by that title.

Ideye's approach was like Murray's. "It's only a title. You've got to have that humility, you've got to have that human touch. I am very simple, I'm very low key, and I'm very humble." Oftentimes participants would talk about their desire to use their first name to purposefully push themselves to stay connected to their first-generation identity. They also recognized that despite their titles, they had no greater value on their campuses or in their families than others did. As Kearney described:

> You're always going to be humble. When I go home now, my father is 90, and I go in there, I make the tea, and I clean the dishes because my brother is older than me. And that's never changing, that's never changing … there's zero talk of me being a college president ever … so it's a part of knowing your place, I guess, is what I'm saying. And I think the world in which I grew up insisted on that, you know your place. … There's a depth of respect for the people that surround you in those places and that create that place, create you… it's laden with respect.

Stephens echoed Kearney's approach and used the respect and humility he has for others to push himself to never forget where he came from. Stephens noted that being

president of his alma mater where he also spent most of his career assisted him to maintain humility:

> I don't ever want to lose that, because it's easy. I make a crazy amount of money for people who come from where I do, and people wash my car, and you know, it's—that was fascinating to me. I think if I had been named president of another college and had gone there and people had treated me the way they do college presidents, I would have thought that I was something special.

Perspective-taking. The humility that was consistent among the data was closely connected to participants' deep appreciation for their past and upbringing. Oftentimes participants compared themselves to family or peers who had not achieved the levels of success participants had in their education and careers. Murray's appreciation for where he came from and what he had achieved was constant throughout his childhood, educational experiences, and professional life. As he explained:

> I had enough food to eat and a roof over my head, and my parents loved me and add everything I wanted to do, I got to do, and I have this incredibly privileged life. But not just now that I'm president. I definitely felt that way when I was assistant dean of students—there were people digging ditches whereas I got to go work on springfest and get paid for it.

For Thompson, his deep sense of perspective and appreciation was transparent when he described his career path in contrast to his brother's:

> He passed away about two years ago, but he lived the kind of life you would have associated with someone who would not have the advantages of having a college degree. If I had not gotten my degree, I would have been a car mechanic like my

> brother. I would have smoked like my brother and died prematurely like my brother. A college degree made a huge lifestyle impact.

Stephens had a similar sense of appreciation for the way his perspective grounds him. “The first-gen can ground you a bit if you can hang on to it. … When you think about what families are worried about or what they’re thinking about or—what their hopes are.” Stephens also noted how perspective-taking as a first-generation president gives him a distinctive advantage in his role:

> It’s a tremendous advantage for me to know—to not ever lose sight of what it’s like out there for the families who come in our admissions office and are scared to death and don’t know what questions to ask, and in this place, the grass is so trimmed and the office furniture looks like it does. … You know, it helps me to have two sisters who struggle to make ends meet.

Transparency and genuineness. Throughout the demeanor of participants, there was a genuineness that was rooted in valuing transparency. Cook connected his transparency to his own upbringing but realized he had to temper his own level of transparency at times to be effective as president:

> I have a very transparent kind of approach to things, so I have told faculty and staff, etc., don’t ask me unless you really want to know my opinion and that’s getting me in trouble at times. That was inherited from my father, by the way, and I learned with one constituency, the board, that I had to be careful with that.

Ideye echoed Cook’s transparency. His genuineness was clear in his relationships but was also emphasized in the way he approaches his campus community. “You may not like what I tell you, but I’ll always tell you the truth.” Jennings shared a specific example

of her commitment to fostering transparency when she was selected president after participating in a closed search process where the campus community did not have chance to meet her:

> I had suggested that I thought it would be good for me to come down and make remarks. … The incoming chair … he had been traveling abroad, and he said, "I think that's a horrible idea because," he said, "you know, we would never do that in corporate America and we would just put the person in." So I said, "Well, it's a little late for that, we've already announced it and everything." So I did come down and give remarks and it was the right thing to do.

Family and Community

As first-generation college students, participants had unique relationships with their families and communities of origin. For many, it was their community that helped them achieve new heights. Ideye recognized it was his family and, in particular, his father who impacted his educational path. He stated that his father made it clear that "everybody must go to college because he believed in the power of what education can really do to transform people." All ten of Ideye's siblings attended college despite his upbringing in a poor region of rural Nigeria. Cook may have grown up in a different social class than Ideye, but received a similar message. "I grew up in sort of lower-middle-class kind of a background, neither parent obviously went to college. But the expectation was just always there that you would go to college." For Wright, growing up in foster care and group homes, it was the father of a close friend who helped him presevere. Wright recalled the day his friend's father said to him, "If you ever need a place to stay, you have a place here, you understand?" Wright later had to take his friend's father up on his offer,

and it was the support of the family that allowed him to finish high school and start college. For Stephens, it was his father's friend who suggested a specific junior college for him to attend and play football, and for Thompson, it was an older brother who helped him overcome obstacles. "My mathematician older brother was there and was able to tutor me through the coursework."

Not only did families and communities help participants achieve and succeed but they often played key roles in helping participants "get out" of their hometowns or difficult upbringing. Despite the challenges of his hometown, Stephens's aunt was a key person in helping him find his way out of the small town. "I was lucky … my aunt had gone to college, gotten her counseling degree, and she was our high school guidance counselor. So, I benefited from Aunt Ruth." For Kearney, it was relationships and the support of his family that provided him the self-efficacy to push himself beyond his upbringing and get out:

> Everybody knows their place. And that sounds harsh ... I mean 'place' in a generous sense, like you're grounded, right? And that grounding comes about as a result of those relationships that bring about a certain element of security and identity and all those things which at the same time you're struggling to get out of in a way.

Murray's family was not initially supportive and did not play a role in his educational experience, but it was his success and academic achievement that helped his parents have a new appreciation for higher education:

> What might have been different in my case than some was how actively hostile my family and environment was toward the idea of higher education. … There

> was the very disdainful part about how unrealistic and how out of touch higher ed is and how worthless it was. … My father in particular hated higher education. Once I was in it, he was always—you know, he was proud of me.

Parents, extended family, and community played a crucial role in each participant's path, and among the responses regarding family and community, three distinct trends emerged from the data. The trends include communal decision making, uninformed support, and immigrant perspectives. The three trends are detailed below.

Communal decision making. Parents, family, and members of participants' communities influenced their decision-making process regarding college attendance and career progression. Stephens shared that it was members of his small rural community that helped him decide where to attend college. "In my hometown was this guy who had started out at a junior [college] and gotten a four-year scholarship to play football … I didn't even know there was such a thing as a junior college … so that's what I did." A couple years later it was again his community that helped Stephens find a place to get back into college and play football again after taking time off:

> I got back in touch with my coaches and said … "I'd like to still play college football somewhere, so if you hear of anything that might be interested in a scrawny, White receiver." And they said, "Well you're in luck. There's a small school that used to be a junior college and they had a football team then, but they dropped it when they became a senior college but they're adding it back."

That small bit of advice from his extended community changed Stephens's path significantly—he not only had a successful football and collegiate experience there but he went on to be the president of that small school that used to be a junior college. For

Jennings, she recounted that she made her decision of where to attend college because her older sister attended the same small college not too far from their family's home:

> I had been up there for sibling weekend, so I was familiar with it and when I got there, I and my sister have a strong family resemblance, so I was sort of known right away when I got up there. And I just loved college from day one.

Participants also noted that whenever they had difficult decisions to make on their campuses they would seek the perspective of their family and communities. Cook shared that his father's background in construction was particularly useful for advice when he was amid building projects on campus. For Kearney, he distinctly recalled his mother's advice when deciding to take a promotion offered to him. "When I first considering the dean job … I remember her sitting there and telling me—encouraging me—trying to talk me away from it, don't do it. And she said, 'Because you'll never sleep, because she knew me that way.'"

Uninformed support. Participants shared that parents and family often did their best to support them throughout their college experiences despite not knowing how to do so. Scott noted, "They supported me even though they had no idea what this whole animal was like." Although his parents offered unending support, they also motivated him to push himself through obstacles:

> When I came home the first trimester and got my grades, my parents said, "Well, how'd you do?" And I didn't do well and they said, "You know, that's okay. Not everybody is college material. You know, it's alright." And the worst part about it was the feeling that I had deep down that I knew that it was because of me, it wasn't because of us as a family. They had all the support in the world and they

> definitely wanted me to be in college, but they had no clue what college was really about. And so I just got to a point where it's like, you know, I could walk away. I mean, they said, "You can go get a job down at the plant." … People were doing it and making a great living. But I knew that I had not really given it my best and that's when I had to really kind of dig deep.

Jennings had a similar experience and wanted to drop out of college due to a lack of direction. In contrast to her indecisiveness, her older sister was studying education, a path she knew she wanted to pursue since childhood. Jennings's parents offered for her to come home and get a job locally, but she stayed and persevered. Stephens shared that despite being an excellent student, his parents generally only provided accolades for his athletic accomplishments. "They really enjoyed athletics and understood that. It's not that they didn't value academic stuff, but they understood athletic accomplishment." Kearney shared a similar sentiment, recalling his father's inquisitive support. "I can remember him always saying, will that get you a good job?"

Immigrant perspectives. Of the nine participants in the study, three described the ways immigration benefited their family, community, and ability to overcome obstacles. For Murray, his grandfather immigrated to the United States, which resulted in little understanding of the U.S. educational system—adding an additional layer for his family, "my other grandfather immigrated to the U.S. from Scotland but had not completed schooling before coming over. So, just nobody knew anything about college. But—and so that's typical, I think, of first-generation students." Kearney's experience as the child of immigrants has resulted in him constantly straddling different worlds:

> I think they all overlap, right. But, I would say—and I think this is a typical immigrant story, that if you would look back at the major elements and major sort of undertakings that I've gone through, whether it's athletics or school or professional, I've always been straddling the inside/outside personas.

The most salient example of the ways that immigrant identity impacted educational and career attainment in the United States was from Ideye, who was a first-generation immigrant as well as a first-generation college student. Ideye shared fond memories of the ways his parents portrayed higher education. He spoke of his father's early message to him about college. "He used to tell me that you're going to meet with kings and queens if you get a good education, which is a fact for me now." Ideye's desire to get his advanced degrees from a Western approach to higher education is not an uncommon one (Childs, Finnie, & Mueller, 2017). His immigrant identity also shaped Ideye's career aspirations, but he ultimately had to stray from his father's desires for him. "My father particularly wanted me to be a doctor, but I always saw myself as a teacher because I love people, I love to talk, I love to meet people. See I always fantasized about teaching."

After finishing his degrees, Ideye's strength in his immigrant identity helped him get his career off the ground:

> One of the things about immigrants, even if you live in a one-bedroom, as an immigrant, every immigrant that comes here, you'll take them. So, this guy literally—we lived in one-bedroom—took my wife, took my daughter, and we stayed with him for about six months. I mean, while I was looking around.

Ideye's immigrant identity also shaped his appreciation for U.S. higher education and served as a constant reminder of what the United States can offer:

> There is no utopia in the world, but the closest place to utopia, despite all the political shenanigans … is the U.S. … There is no other place in the world, if you know where I'm from, that will give you an opportunity to become a president in the world, of a college.

Ideye's success in the United States is common— his immigrant identity is deeply rooted in hard work as a perseverance and resiliency tactic. In addition, Jayanti and Scott (2012) identify that immigrants may be resilient to race-based negative-ability stereotypes.

Approach to Problem Solving

Throughout the data, participants articulated ways in which they were presented with new and challenging obstacles and yet were able to overcome each one. Many described how they were able to use their backgrounds and work ethic to solve the problems that arose along their paths as students and academic administrators. Murray demonstrates this trend as he talks about his career success:

> So I had all of this success and got promoted just for doing my normal job and I think the first-generation thing—where you're expected to be self-reliant and you're expected to do what you're asked—maybe I was too deferential to supervisors, but nobody ever asked me to do anything that was unethical or anything else. So it shocked me later on to look back and realize, well, I guess I had a better work ethic and better ability to resolve conflict, to handle difficult situations, to find compromise

Kearney articulated his approach to solving problems and overcoming obstacles in his career similarly to Murray. He recalled the first time he had to manage others in a difficult academic setting:

> It was a pretty challenging environment to walk into as a young first-time dean with virtually no experience. But I think my instincts were pretty good. … I mean, where do those instincts come from? Growing up … playing ball, working in construction … being aware of your environment, having respect for older people on the playground. And you learn a lot that you just cannot get anywhere else.

Within the data, four distinct responses emerged within the trend of problem solving, and each is explained in detail below. Those four distinct responses include using past strengths such athleticism or academic prowess to overcome challenges, using native intelligence gleaned from their first-generation and working-class upbringings, having a no-nonsense persona whereby participants articulated little tolerance for foolishness, and having an ability to navigate insider and outsider identities that gave participants the ability to solve problems and overcome obstacles.

Past strengths. Participants often described strengths from their past that helped them solve current problems or overcome obstacles. Oftentimes the strengths highlighted were academic or athletic success. Murray described in detail the day he took a standardized test in high school that landed him a National Merit Scholarship and made college affordable for him:

> When you're in a high school where there's a lot of violence, a lot of poverty, those sorts of things—I think there's this more economic matter than anything else. But even if you are someone who probably should be going to college, I only

> was a National Merit Scholar because my junior year they gathered some of us from one of my classes, I think it was a math class or history class, and said, "We're taking the PSAT." This was during the school day. I'd never heard of the PSAT, didn't know what college boards were or anything else. when no one in your family has any experience with this, you just haven't heard of it. And—there wasn't any test prep or anything like that, I just walked in and took it. Well, it went well, and they named semi-finalists from that, so then they give you the chance to take the SAT. And I got the National Merit Scholarship, so I had money for college but no plans for college.

Stephens also recalled how his academic successes helped him solve problems both academically and financially. His academic success earned him a scholarship that allowed him to continue at the college when his family could not afford the cost. He also recalled the day he took a math placement exam and fought against his own insecurities when he learned his results:

> I'm like, you didn't call my name. And the guy is like, "What?" And you know, so he's looking at it, and I'm like, "Oh gosh, you know, I failed out." And it turns out I had tested into pre-calculus and hardly anybody did that at this junior college and at the time I didn't know that it was special.

Cook had a similar experience where his standardized test scores earned him a full scholarship for his MBA. For Thompson, his academic success earned him an opportunity to write a faculty-guided undergraduate thesis, which helped him understand his interest and strength in research, ultimately leading to him pursuing a PhD in political science. For Kearney and Wright, it was their academic prowess and athletic nature that

helped them solve other problems including fitting in and persevering in college. Upon arriving at his highly selective liberal arts college, the basketball team helped Kearney overcome barriers and succeed at the college. “When I got there I felt completely out of place, I mean, except for the basketball program and the basketball team.” Wright also noted the ways his basketball prowess helped him while deciding on colleges:

> I wanted to play basketball. I was self-aware enough to know that I wasn’t going to play at that level. I mean, I—the exposure I’d gotten to Division I basketball players even at the age 16-17-18—it was a different animal than I was. But I still wanted to compete.

Relying on their strengths allowed participants to transfer success into other areas of their lives to solve problems and thrive. Their strengths and successes helped them gain confidence and self-assurance.

Native intelligence. Throughout the interviews and data analysis, there was a common approach to problem solving among participants whereby they articulated a confidence in being able to figure out new things. Their background, skills, and native intelligence allowed them to navigate unfamiliar terrain in many areas of their lives and gave them confidence to not be shaken by new challenges. I attribute this native intelligence to their first-generation upbringing, which required them to advocate for themselves throughout their academic and career experiences. As Wright described it, “to be successful at this, a certain basic confidence in your ability to sort of deal with what is put in front of you.” Wright demonstrated that confidence throughout his life. He recalled being unsure of what college would be like but not being concerned:

> I remember clearly the moment that I knew I was going to be fine one way or another. It was standing in line the first day in registration and looking around and sort of saying, this seems like the same batch of folks I've been dealing with all of my life, I can figure this out.

Jennings articulated two distinct examples of times she demonstrated and used native intelligence. One was when she started as director of residence life and there were substantial facilities challenges that were unfamiliar to her. Jennings was able to successfully maneuver the challenges using her strong instincts. The second example was years later when Jennings was asked to take on an interim role. She recounted, "I knew it would be a lot of learning, which it was sort of immediately, but that we would—we were not going to let it fail."

Cook and Stephens had similar experiences in their careers where they demonstrated native intelligence. For Cook, he was asked to lead the graduate and adult programs, an area he had little experience, but was confident he could learn:

> They put me in training to be the ultimate dean of their graduate and adult program and so I literally trained for that for a semester and that had been announced that I was going to be the heir-apparent to the dean who was retiring. I've had a native love for adult students, could relate to a lot of them because of the first-generation kind of thing, graduate piece I wasn't so sure about. I figured I could learn that.

It was native intelligence that allowed Stephens to succeed when he was asked to oversee admissions, an area in which he had no direct experience. Stephens's intuition allowed him to succeed and earn another promotion as a result:

> I didn't have all the baggage of this is the way admissions should be done, so I built a pretty good portfolio in admission. We really started getting some enrollment gains by doing some things differently. Eventually they gave me financial aid, then they gave me marketing and communications, then the dean of students left, and they put them together and elevated me to a vice president and I had student affairs and enrollment management.

No-nonsense persona. In addition to using past strengths and a native intelligence to solve problems, the data revealed a common response to foolishness among participants. When people, programs, or structures were distracting participants from their priorities or causing ethical challenges, participants had no tolerance and could see through facades. For example, Scott shared how another president of a much higher-caliber institution within his university's system would never acknowledge his presence, and he brought it to the president's attention. He made it clear to the other president that he was being treated differently, which he would not tolerate.

Wright's no-nonsense persona was the strongest of the participants. Even as a first-year college student, he had little tolerance for professors' egos:

> I saw through him pretty early on. Obviously a very smart guy—University of Chicago PhD. But somebody who took himself far too seriously in the presumption that you would take him seriously just because he was standing in front of you, I didn't get. Now, might have been dumb on my part because he might have been world-renowned. But I'm thinking … this is not MIT.

In law school, Wright's resolve for not tolerating foolishness continued. He recalled confronting a professor who disrespected him in class:

> The first semester he called on me and I said something, he said something about stupid back to me. I don't know if he called me stupid or said it was a stupid answer or whatever. I'm like, okay, I'm a little older, I'm a little more mature, I'm not going to go off on him on the spot, but I went by his office and I said, "You know, I'm 25 years old and I was perfectly happy before I ever knew you, no one gets to talk to me that way. So, the next time you say something like that to me in class, I'm saying something back to you." … And if he was prepared to try and get me thrown out of law school, I would be fine. I was doing fine before I went to law school, but you don't get to treat me that way.

For some participants, their no-nonsense persona resulted in deciding to leave an institution if the nonsense or foolishness was pervasive. This was the case for Wright. He recounted two different roles that he left due to poor leadership or supervisors' actions not being consistent with their stated principles. He recalled one of his departures. "I voted with my feet and left there … the dean that was running stuff got on my nerves." Kearney recalled a time he had to take over an academic unit that had been in disarray. He noted that it was his upbringing that helped him have the resolve to not tolerate foolishness:

> I just took the dean's job and I had just taken over a department because they were completely dysfunctional. So, having the courage to do that and just say, look—and I didn't know if it was the right thing or not, but I knew somebody had to come in there and say, "You're not going to act like this anymore." … I could see my father doing that on a job when he was running [construction] jobs downtown. And just guys that I grew up and worked with just didn't have the

> time and certainly not the patience to listen to that bullshit, you know. So, I think that kind of was ingrained in me… I attribute it to the sort of implicit no-bullshit rule I grew up and the neighborhood I grew up in. Nobody is putting up with that.

For Murray, despite having a calm demeanor, he attributed his internal no-nonsense approach to survival skills he learned while growing up in a challenging urban environment:

> I grew up feeling like you had to be afraid of the world. You wander into school and you're the youngest, skinniest, whitest person, not the only White kid there, and there was a lot of violence, there really was. I was in the hospital multiple times, there was a great many fights, it was—it was a tough spot. So you develop a real ability to stand up for yourself. You have to, it's survival.

Their no-nonsense approach stemming from a strong intuition was something participants had to learn to temper throughout their education and careers. However, it was often a source of strength, problem-solving, and overcoming obstacles.

Ability to navigate insider/outsider identities. Throughout their lives, participants had to navigate insider and outsider identities. For some, like Wright and Murray, it happened much earlier in life, being educated in schools where there were few who shared their racial identities. Wright saw his ability to navigate White environments as a strength, and it was when he got to college that he recognized how it benefited him. "I was much better equipped than most of my African American peers who were on that campus to deal with that environment because they typically came from more urban areas." Murray recounted having to navigate his insider/outsider identities growing up. "Not to sound arrogant, but if you were smart, you had to hide that in my environment,

that wasn't cool." Learning to explore other interests and having multiple sides of his identity helped Murray navigate his educational experience. Later in life it helped him feel more comfortable using the country club membership that came with his role as president. Kearney had a similar experience growing up in a working-class community where he struggled to reconcile his first-generation masculine identity with that of a scholar. He shared how he began to reconcile those identities:

> I was studying philosophy and playing—so I was straddling that fence there. When I was in construction, same thing, I was in school. But yet, when I'm in the academic world, I am very fond and proud of my construction work or my athletic world. So, there's always these sort of—dichotomous elements at play. … There's one particular moment, again, I was wrestling with being a hardcore academic and still being a sort of fulfilled athlete. … I used to train hard and we used to do hurling. … I remember driving I made the decision I'm not going to go hurling, I'm going to go learn Irish and I remember driving by on the highway … while they were hurling, I was like, okay, well—and I felt good about my decision, you're going to go learn Irish instead of doing hurling right now.

Participants' ability to navigate their identities allowed them to navigate the insider/outsider responsibilities that come along with being a college president. As president, Kearney noted how he interacted with his board of trustees and potential donors with the same insider/outsider mentality:

> The community in which those folks run, it's not my world. And I'm respectful. … I communicate with them, I communicate well, I socialize when I have to, but it's not my go-to. … The presidency of this school has typically also been a site of

> bizarre kind of in-ness for some community members and board members and that doesn't happen with me. And I think that's alienated some folks in a way but also brought other folks in.

Creating a counter-narrative and bringing outsiders in, as Kearney alluded to, was also part of Jennings's experience. As the only woman on the leadership team at her university for years, she learned to create space for folks with marginalized or minoritized identities:

> [When] I first was vice president I was sort of up on the stage behind ferns for one of the graduations. So, there was a lot of sort of paving the way … there wasn't a lot of diversity, there weren't a lot of women, there weren't a lot of people of color or certainly gay or lesbian. I had, actually, in my very first year—well, the first two years, two out of my four assistant directors came out and it was at a Catholic college in early years.

As Jennings alluded to, and for many other participants, learning to navigate insider/outsider aspects of their identity came from managing environments where they had to navigate and overcome oppression. Ideye recalled a time when he was applying for a position in the Southeast. "When I read it, my background is curriculum and instruction, I said, I can do it, and—but somebody—we were working in the labs together told me, they will never hire you, he said, the South is racist." Ideye did not let this concern stop him from getting the job, and later he learned to be even more upfront when applying for jobs on campuses with few people of color. "When I interviewed for the position, I made it clear to them, don't use me as an affirmative action number." Wright recounted numerous experiences growing up Black in the rural Midwest and attending

college there. He often had to stand up for himself against racist acts. Learning to handle racist interactions also allowed Wright to be a good judge of others, their intentions, and their values. He recalled a time in a law school class when a young professor confronted him on a poorly written argument but offered to assist him during her office hours. Reflecting on the interaction later, he recognized the value in not letting past racist interactions cloud his decision to seek her assistance and judge that she had good intentions:

> For African American students, a lot of times they don't get that sort of direct feedback and they get it so seldom that often times they don't know what to do with it when it happens. … I can imagine how many times somebody read something that I wrote that could have been better and they said, "Well, that's pretty good, that's good enough" … whereas, if they thought it was a talented White kid and they saw something, "So this could be better, I'm going to help him … to make this better, right?" Soft bigotry of low expectations and she had the courage to do that and it was—I probably got more out of that session than anything else I ever did in law school.

For Murray, growing up as one of few White kids at a Black school, he had an opposite experience with a similar outcome whereby he was able to understand multiple narratives on race from an early age:

> A faculty member here asked me … how did you [not] come out the opposite? You know, angry or something like that. Well, it's not what you might think, when almost everyone you know is African American—outside of your family—then all the best people you know are African American. So all the smartest kids

> in my school were African American, the best athletes, the best singers, most community service–oriented, all of the rest.

Navigating insider and outsider identities allowed participants to develop a skill set to navigate environments and see themselves and others from multiple vantage points.

Relationship with work. A unique relationship with work was the final response that emerged regarding the way participants solved problems. The data continued to identify that participants had a willingness to put in hard work and oftentimes go above and beyond what was asked of them to succeed. For Ideye, this was represented in finishing his master's program early. "Instead of the two years, I did the program in two semesters and one summer. And … my GPA was close to 4.00." Stephens recounted spending his spare time in college in the library. Scott almost flunked out his first year and put in endless hours of effort to the point where he excelled in his second year and tutored others. Cook recalled when he started his graduate program and understood the level of rigor, he was taken aback but adjusted to the hard work it required:

> So I called my mom and said, "I have made a mistake … this whole PhD program." … There was nobody there to say, here's any kind of advice to give you, so I was the last person to leave the library for the entire week and I gave him his six 20-page papers and only half the class came back. And he put a check mark on the peoples' papers and said, "Welcome to boot camp" and then it was on.

Throughout their careers, participants shared that they became seen as the person to go to get things done on their campuses. They finished projects, improved processes, and as Murray stated, among he and his first-generation peers, "there is definitely a

different drive, what we can attribute that drive to I think varies by person, but there is." Scott noted numerous programs he created over his career. Many expanded his portfolio and stretched him, but the hard work and challenge kept him motivated. Ideye became known as the go-to manager to fix programs and grow units:

> I put the whole of the tutoring in place, implemented the Title III grant, developed the CIA lab, foreign language lab, writing lab, math lab. … The chancellor at that time would say, "We need you to go here and fix this problem" and I would fix it.

Jennings articulated a similar approach. She often noticed where hard work was needed and was quick to jump in:

> When the advancement vice president left suddenly and, you know, I basically volunteered to be the interim vice president for advancement because I felt like, you know, who is going to do it? There was not an heir-apparent in the advancement staff, we couldn't go without one. It would take a while to do a search, and I didn't really care on those things. On a lot of those things where I was like, sure, I'll do it, I didn't care whether I got paid or not.

Participants' perspectives on work were often rooted in the hard work they had seen from their parents or siblings. The manual labor of many family members often resulted in physical harm to their bodies such as construction, factory work, and being a mechanic. Murray articulated that it took him years to understand that he could derive pleasure from work because growing up that was not a reality. "My parents hated their jobs, they hated their supervisors—hated them. And yet imagine me going on to work for the same company." Although many did learn to find joy in their work, they often did so

by comparing their work to others and never saw their work as hard. As Murray recounted:

> It didn't seem hard to me—the conflict, the difficult, unpleasant, emotional situations, working with families and students. Yeah, it was hard, but it was definitely no harder than what I did at home or in school growing up. And the work—the number of hours expected didn't seem to me to be excessive, it seemed to me to be easier than the summer jobs I'd had. It was easier than factory work or something.

Kearney also learned to appreciate and find joy in his work by comparing his job to his brother's—a first responder who saved lives. Kearney's joy was paired with a sense of longing when he contemplated what his future may hold:

> For the future, will I keep doing this? I don't know. I need to keep doing it for a while because of my kids, certainly don't see myself doing it into old age. And not because I can't handle the job, the job is actually not that hard. There are aspects of it that aren't that much fun, but there's a lot of aspects that are a lot of fun.

The final thread within participants' relationship with work was their willingness to put in extra work to master skills they lacked. This often involved working hard behind the scenes or after hours to master new challenges, but it was something participants spoke of with a sense of joy and accomplishment. Murray spoke of teaching himself new skills, as did others. He noted, "Almost any of these things that we consider to be our private spheres of expertise can be taught, you have to have a work ethic and you have to have intelligence." For Stephens working hard behind the scenes manifested as a teenager

when he saw a professional basketball player using a unique jump shot technique on TV. He quickly went to the library, checked out a book, studied, practiced, and mastered the shot. For Ideye, his willingness to teach himself things and put in extra effort was evident in his graduate program. He was seeking to get more involved in his department and exploring opportunities to work for the program when a colleague offered him a position that few wanted in the photography lab:

> "Do you want to work in the lab?" I said, "Sure." He said, "Have you developed photographs before?" I said, "Hell no, I have no clue." But I said to him, I said, "If you show me," I said, "all I need you to do is to show me once. If you show me what to do and be patient with me asking you questions, I'll take it. I'll do it."

For Cook, he quickly learned about the liberal arts to be better prepared for his campus environment:

> I told you I was transparent to begin with—there's like a book called the *Idiots Guide to the Liberal Arts* and it's maybe like 400 pages. And you get a really quick synopsis of all of the different, you know, philosopher—all of the things that you would get in a traditional liberal arts education that I read cover to cover.

Throughout their academic pursuits and professional careers, participants navigated their career paths and transcended obstacles by having a unique relationship with work. Combined with unique and multi-faceted demeanors, family and community, and unique approaches to problem solving, participants were able to transcend boundaries and barriers at numerous points throughout their education and careers.

Theme Three: Accidental Pathways to the Presidency

> I'm the last person you want to talk to about a plan because there never was. I mean, I didn't even think I'd work in higher ed until I was 31 years old and I'd been stuffing envelopes as a temp in southern California and got the magic call to come back. Only had a bachelor's degree and it was just my personal relationships that got me that. There's nothing about what I did that I would advise another person to do. … If I had set out to be a college president … I would have gotten the terminal degree as quickly as possible, you know, all the things that you're supposed to do. I do like the fact that I didn't have traditional degrees, and I like that I've bounced around between other areas. I think that was a real advantage that I had some student affairs, I had some chief financial officer, I mean, I had taught some classes … I knew a little bit about that. … For a small, private college, non-selective president, I can't imagine a better background.

As Stephens articulates in his account of how he became a college president, he is like many of his peers—none of them set out to be a college president. They took indirect, or as one participant put it "accidental," paths to the presidency. For participants, as articulated in the previous two themes, it was a combination of mentors, demeanor, family and community, approach to problem solving, and their relationship with work that helped them become college presidents. Beyond these aspects and skills, however, there were additional contributing factors that helped prepare participants to be presidents. Those factors include flexible career decision-making and an entrepreneurial energy that focuses on producing results and continued professional challenge. I will outline the ways in which these trends manifest within the theme of presidential pathways

and end this theme by connecting the data collected to the career development theory of planned happenstance (Mitchell, Levin, & Krumboltz, 1999).

Flexibility in Career Decision-Making and Professional Development

> I got my degree and worked—and got the magic job offer to be in a white-collar role, which no one in my family had ever imagined. Yeah, he went to college and got that offer and I turned it down. And that was the key point because the fraternity had a program where they would pay for graduate school if you would be an RA and live in the house. And so I got a chance to go back and get my master's and, for the first time, decided, what do I love to do? I love to read. So I got my master's in English and that was the kind of thing, if I were not first-generation, would have happened four years earlier. So that's one lesson in that. And that—and while doing that I had assistantships teaching English and an assistantship in the Greek Life office, discovered through that that there was a profession known as higher ed administration because I became close with the various student affairs professionals and at some point asked one of them, "How do you get a job like yours?"

Murray's description of navigating his early career path was not an uncommon one among participants. Many chose practical majors in college such as business, engineering, or pre-med—career paths that first-generation parents understood and supported. Wright noted that despite his passion for history and political science, "I was a business major for the simple idea is that given my background I wanted to be able to get a job." For Cook, his decision-making process was less strategic but turned out to be one that fit his strengths. "My undergraduate degree is in accounting. I really don't like to

admit this publicly, but I chose my major based on the person I was sitting beside in my accounting class. She was an extremely attractive." Many chose to attend a college in their home state and oftentimes it was a cost-effective state institution that served their region of the state. As Murray described, "So, I did what most of my neighborhood did if they went to college—they live at home, they work, and they go to the local university." Despite their uninformed approach to decision-making, many participants succeeded by taking advantage of opportunities. Throughout the data, participants articulated saying yes to all opportunities that presented themselves. Stephens shared his perspective on how taking advantage of opportunities benefits career progression:

> When presented with an opportunity, the answer should always be yes. And that was something that wasn't a plan, but looking back I recognized I benefited from … when somebody said, do you want to be the cross-country coach? I didn't know a damn thing about coaching cross country, but I was like, "Yeah. That sounds fun." And now I have a deep understanding of athletics—you know, what it takes to recruit a student. … So it's funny, it's almost like I was preparing to be a president all along and had no idea that I was preparing to be a president.

As Stephens described, it was often mentors who made opportunities available to participants. Scott had a similar experience when he got a phone call while working in industry to teach a class at a local community college. Saying yes to that opportunity helped him realize his passion for teaching. Murray explained that throughout his career always said yes to interim positions, even when he had no expertise in the area. It was his final interim position as chief financial officer and VP for finance and administration that made him such an attractive presidential candidate.

In these examples, participants articulated mentors making opportunities available, but for many participants they sought out opportunities on their own as well. Thompson explained that he took a risk and convinced his department to give him sabbatical for a year to take a role in Washington, DC. “I saw an advertisement for being a Judicial Fellow which is the U.S. Federal Court system—the equivalent of a being a Congressional Fellow or a White House Fellow.” Thompson spent a year in the role and realized it was not his passion. Thompson returned to higher education with renewed interest. Exploring a number of interests and saying yes to a variety of opportunities also helped Kearney find his career path. After college he explored many options to find clarity:

> I talked about law school, and I worked at a law firm and realized that wasn’t what I wanted to do. I taught at a high school for a while and that was fun—I mean, teaching was fun and I really got into it, but while I was there, I realized I wanted to do philosophy full time.

Ideye had said “sure” or “why not” to all opportunities that presented themselves throughout his career as well. There was one during his graduate work in particular that shaped his personal and professional path:

> Sometimes the best laid plans never come to fruition… so I got a call in the spring of 1982 from the international office because I’m listed there as volunteer that will work with students that come in. Said there is a young lady coming from Nigeria that needs to be picked up from the airport. Will you go pick them up? I said, “Sure, I just don’t have a car.” I said, “If you give me the flight information

> and give me the details, and I'll go pick them up." Drove to Indianapolis to go pick this girl, never knew I was going to meet my wife.

Experiences that many participants took advantage of were executive leadership or fellowship programs designed to prepare university administrators for executive roles. Participants spoke very highly of these experiences and the ways they helped prepare them for the role. Ideye participated in a program specifically for community college leaders of color, and his experience gave him the confidence to actively pursue the presidency. "It was an eye opener for me. We did leadership characteristics, visited Miami-Dade, visited different community colleges, met with different presidents. Then I think I just said to myself, yes, I can do this." Consistent with the anti-deficit achievement theory, presidential preparation programs played a crucial role in building the self-efficacy needed for participants to take the leap to presidency (Bandura, 1997; Harper, 2010).

Entrepreneurial Approach

Scott talked in detail about how he wanted to make sure his first institution as president would be one where he could turn around a struggling institution. A position where he would maintain the status quo was of no interest to him. "Somewhere deep inside of me, I see the possibilities in the higher ed market. And if anything, I grow frustrated with bureaucracy that holds you back from being able to take advantage of that." Throughout his career, Scott has approached each of his roles with an entrepreneurial spirit. When describing his time at a previous institution, he described with excitement how he had the opportunity to create programs, and despite where his career took him, he felt most fulfilled in positions where he could create:

> And then that program took off. The next thing you know, they ask me—well, could you move over to the traditional program? And the next thing you know, I was the academic dean, and that happened in four years. It was just, boom, boom, boom, I need to finish this doctorate. And went out, started my own [higher education consulting] company, did that for four years. ... I was traveling around the country working on that and with working with accelerated learning. … I loved the flexibility of my own consulting firm, but what really grieved me was when you're a consultant, when the work's done, get out. They want you out. You are billable hours. … I was unfulfilled because I didn't get to see the work that I was doing come to fruition.

When prompted to reflect on his career path, Cook noted his interest in being an entrepreneur has been a constant in his career. He had an offer from a top accounting firm after college but noted, "I turned down offers from them to go an entrepreneurial firm. That should have been my first clue that I probably was going to be different in my path." Cook went on to explain how in each of his roles he has explored ways to be creative, innovative, and identify unique revenue streams. For Wright, he reflected on a challenging role that involved a start-up for-profit law school and recalled having "great fun building that school," echoing his peers' willingness to take risks on unique jobs that would allow for an entrepreneurial approach. Stephens described his entrepreneurial spirit as being rooted in curiosity and restlessness. For Ideye and Thompson, their entrepreneurial approach played out in improving young institutions, growing enrollments, and building projects on campuses. As Thompson stated, "I came in the fall

of 2005, summer of 2005, and we've built $1.2B worth of buildings and opened up a [another] campus and started a football program."

In addition to approaching their roles from an entrepreneurial vantage point, the data also demonstrated that participants consistently needed to be challenged and that they often bored easily. Jennings noted that she had a very fulfilling career prior to becoming a president and recalled a close friend asking why she would take on a presidency. "You have a great job, why do you need one more thing?" Like most of her peers, Jennings need additional challenge and had a sense of obligation to use her experience to benefit others. Ideye was more direct about his need to be challenged. "One of the things about me, I get bored easily." His first presidency was lauded, and he could have named his price to stay, but the job no longer offered challenge. As he explained to his board of trustees:

> I'm 60 years old. If I want some challenges, this place here has a lot of challenges. I need to do something that is more challenging in my last—this is my last job I'm going to take, so this is the primary reason why I'm applying. Your institution is great, but I need to try my hands in something different.

Wright also talked about leaving positions when he realized there was no longer a challenge for him. Stephens noted he kept having new opportunities and challenges at his institution that kept him there:

> I think if I had stayed in one area, I wouldn't have stayed here. The fact [they] kept giving me different opportunities kept the job new … if I had been director of career services for eight years, I would have looked to become the director of

> career services somewhere else. … Every time I got restless, it was almost as if someone knew, "it's time to give John another challenge."

Scott was in a role that allowed him as much autonomy and creativity as he desired, but he explained his need for challenge as well:

> So, what happens? You build new units in your division and you are really entrepreneurial for a long time and probably deep inside, at some point you say, "I want to run the whole show, you know, maybe?" But, at least for me, I justified it to myself this way … that I was really bored because the 10th unit was no more exciting to create than the 9th because it kind of becomes formulaic.

Connected to their entrepreneurial identity, many participants' professional identity was not connected to producing scholarship or being an academic. Two of the seven had a primary identity as academics throughout their career and rose through the ranks of tenured faculty positions. For the other seven participants, however, many took pride in their identity as non-academics. Kearney explained, "The life of the mind is still really important to me, but academically… the more specific sort of research—yeah, no, I don't do that." Wright also has been clear throughout his career about his identity within higher education:

> I don't ever pretend to be a scholar, that's not the path that I followed … this wonderful retired philosophy professor tried to bust my chops when I interviewed here about whether I was a scholar and I said, "Well, I'm not. You've seen my resume, I'm not. If that's what you want, that's not me."

For Ideye, he chose the community college pathway to a presidency to not have to navigate the pressure to publish among academics and academic administrators. "There is

no pretense about it, there is—I'm not researcher, I'm a teacher. And there is not this pressure to publish or anything." Ideye went on to explain that if he had stayed at a research-focused institution, he would not be where he is today:

> I would never even become the provost. I'm unpublished, I didn't write—I've been in administration, I mean, basically I was told that I'd hit my ceiling and they wouldn't hire me. So, [I prefer] the community college with the emphasis on teaching, with the emphasis on student services, with the emphasis of building the next generation of leaders and students. I love the community college.

For participants who identified as academics, they sought more than just teaching and research. As Thompson explained:

> I loved university administration, I just found it so much more interesting than my faculty work alone. I mean, oh, I love my research, I'm really good at it, and I was still publishing. I just love the problem solving that went along with university administration.

Planned Happenstance

Throughout their accidental pathways to the presidency, participants demonstrated entrepreneurial approaches to higher education and flexibility in their career decision-making and professional development. As Stephens pointed out while recounting his career progression, "it was all fortuitous." He seized opportunities and they helped prepare him for the role of president. Others had similar accounts whereby they did not set out to become presidents, but their combination of flexibility in their career paths, curiosity, creativity, and entrepreneurial approach prepared them well to be college presidents. Analyzing the data through the lens of Mitchell, Levin, and

Krumboltz's planned happenstance theory (1999) allows for another view of participants' accounts of accidental pathways to the presidency:

> People who have adopted the planned happenstance model are willing to change plans, take risks, work hard to overcome obstacles, and be actively engaged in pursuing their interests. They may see initially that unplanned events play a role in their careers, but most are modestly unaware that their own actions contributed to the unplanned events from which they benefited. (p. 77)

Planned happenstance theory identifies career trajectories that focus on the ways that unplanned events and opportunities shape one's learning and career path. The theory includes two concepts, including that exploration generates chance opportunities for increasing quality of life and that skills enable people to seize opportunities. The theory supports the career development benefits of indecision and reframes indecision as an openness to taking advantage of unplanned opportunities. Planned happenstance theory recognizes five key skills that support individuals to recognize, create, and use chance in career development including curiosity, persistence, flexibility, optimism, and risk-taking (Mitchell et al., 1999). These five key skills were echoed throughout the data, demonstrating that participants, despite their awareness of it, were engaged in an active career discernment process that prepared them well for their roles as presidents. Their unique first-generation identities may have given them the freedom to take advantage of opportunities and a strong sense of persistence to overcome obstacles.

Theme Four: First-Gen Approaches as Presidents

> I don't think about my first-generation college status as something I had to overcome. I just didn't think of it in that way. I think now it's useful to say to

> people that I know, in my heart that had I not gotten a college degree it would have been a different life—and it wouldn't have mattered what generation I was in. … And I when I talk to students about it, I tell them to look at the data about college degrees—more annual income, more lifetime income, better health, more likely to vote and be philanthropic, less likely to be in trouble with the law, less likely to be on social welfare. I mean, the data speak volumes about college degrees no matter what generation you're coming from. So I talk about that more in the spirit of "you're doing the right thing, you're going to college, you need to finish." And the other point I like to make is that that lots of very able people with tons of potential will be excluded from a career like I had if we can't find a way to help them pay for their college education.

In his excerpt above, Thompson made clear the power that college has to transform lives, as it did his. His belief in the transformative power of a college education consistently informs Thompson's approach as president. Cook echoed Thompson's approach when he talked about a phone call he received from a recruiter encouraging him to apply for a presidency at a school with higher rankings and a stronger national reputation than his small liberal arts college:

> I said, "Look, I really have no interest, things are going well here." And she said, "No, trust me. Just come and interview." Well, that one went very far in the process and as I contemplated the offer, I made the determination that I like the kind of students we have here, I like the first-generation students, I like the fact that I traveled with one of them to Malaysia and we were at a business conference and I had to take him to Belk to help him pick out his belt and his shoes because

> he had no idea. And he didn't have that kind of—it wasn't that he was poor necessarily, he just didn't have that kind of—I think I can make a bigger difference here than I could make at a place that was much higher on the food chain.

Their own first-generation status, the mentors that shaped them, the challenges they overcame, and the unique pathways that participants took to become presidents shaped their approach as president in distinct and meaningful ways. As Thompson points out, they have a root belief that college has the power to change lives. He continued to explain how his own first-generation identity and beliefs shape his approach to his role:

> I use that first-generation line some but only to talk about the value of a college degree for someone like me, who was sort of an average high school student who went on to college. Without the college degree I would have been like my younger brother, flipping tires in the auto store.

Stephens had a similar belief based on his own first-generation identity. "What we do matters. You know, what we do changes the world." Stephens continued, "That's where it becomes a personal story that this place changed the entire trajectory of my life. And so to be able to pay that forward, being a part of doing that for another generation, that's just really cool." First-generation college presidents see students as top priority in decision-making, they place high value and emphasis on people and relationships, and they firmly believe that the mission of an institution matters in the educational product delivered at the institution.

Students as Top Priority

As presidents, the data continually emphasized the way participants put students' needs above all other priorities. Students brought Wright to his current campus and advocating for them and their needs, particularly those who are first-generation and/or low-income, serve as his top motivation:

> I came here because it seemed to be an institution that cared about student outcomes and there are faculty who care very deeply about that. And the longer I'm at this, when I think of why I do it, that's it. And so now, the thing that I have front and center in my mind is how do we improve the student outcomes? I understand all the other moving parts I have to deal with, but I'm going to make investments and do things that are going to—and it's not because of the legislature and all of that kind of stuff. … A lot of first-generation college students, most are students from fairly modest means, we've got to graduate them faster … we have to figure out how to help them figure out how to get that done faster.

Murray's own first-generation identity is what kept him grounded and focused on students despite pressure from other presidents and outside sources:

> We just have to keep our focus on [them] all the time, and I think that's how my background influences how I approach the work. Because I do see a fair amount among peers of concern for pecking order, lack of student centeredness … how do we stack up versus this other college down the road instead of what's really happening for our students. And when you come from less privilege and less sense of entitlement, it's easier to remember that as you are doing the work.

Ideye's approach to students also emphasized their success as the key driver in his work as president:

> From day one, I said, my number one, number two, number three priorities are our students. Every decision that we make, how does this benefit the student, how does this relate to students, how does this advance our mission? So, for me, the way I approach it is this, is I try to look at it from a student-centric point of view. All of the decisions that we make, everything that we do, got be on the focus for our students. We've got to make sure that our students are not only provided with access, we're going to make sure that they stay and we're going to make sure that they graduate. Even those that don't graduate, we've got to make sure we help them meet whatever goals that bring them through our doors.

Ideye's approach was informed by his background at community colleges but echoes that of his peers. Cook's approach emphasized students as a priority but also noted the personal attention that each student must receive at his private liberal arts college. His analogy below was based on touring a Steinway piano factory, where each piano is made by hand with great attention to detail:

> The way they build Steinways are the same way we did students. … It takes two years to build a Steinway because they really have no machines, it's almost all handcrafted. And when they talk about the Steinway, a particular piano, they will refer to her. And I mean, it really is … that's exactly what we do at a place like this. It's a more expensive process and it is extremely time consuming and there are frustrations involved and sometimes the wood isn't cut correctly for them and sometimes it takes a path that we don't want them to go on.

Whether it is making sure students, and particularly first-generation students, have what they need to succeed, creating policy and programs to help them graduate in a timely fashion, or worrying more about student outcomes than rankings, participants consistently prioritized student needs, well-being, and success. Participants often shared their own stories of being first-generation with students and felt that connection was what helped them connect with students and prioritize their needs. As Murray stated, "I think I have a fairly good insight into what they might be going through. I talk about it, you know, so when I meet with them as a group—I think it helps for them to hear a little bit of my story."

Invest in People and Relationships

In addition to prioritizing the needs of students on campus, individuals and relationships were a common trend among the ways in which first-generation presidents approached their roles. The participants demonstrated an expertise for building relationships, and through those relationships and genuine care for others, they were able to have great success in their roles. Jennings talked about living near campus and walking to and from campus at very early and very late hours. She shared with great joy how this allowed her to connect with food service staff, grounds crew, and cleaning staff. Jennings's emphasis on meaningful personal relationships was emphasized as she listed off the individuals attending her inauguration and the roles they have played in her personal and professional life:

> So, Ann who was my assistant for 16 years has always been a very strong advocate; Lisa Baker is supposed to be coming; and Marsha, you know. And so, they were certainly invaluable to me. Father Dobson is going to be a keynote at

> the inauguration. Father Andrews, who married Bob and I and baptized one of our children, will be the homilist at the mass.

Investment in people and relationships also manifested among the data in the ways in which participants trusted colleagues and staff, gave them autonomy, and supported or advocated for them. As Wright stated, "Your people will support you if they know that you have their back, if you're not throwing them under the bus." Scott also emphasized his relationships with his staff and referred to each of his colleagues by first name, just as he requested to be addressed. He noted that he was happy to support his staff and offer advice but that he did not own the curriculum. He jokingly noted his approach to academic issues, "I will suggest—and if they tell me, go pound the sand, I go pound the sand. I'm cool with that, there's plenty of other things to keep me busy," reemphasizing his humility as well. Thompson highlighted relationships with difficult groups like faculty as one of his top strengths and attributes his ability to build relationships to re-opening the door for him as president at his current institution where he formerly served as provost:

> I never really thought it would be all that possible to return because, you know, if you have done your job right and made the tough but difficult decisions, most of the time you're despised by the faculty by the time you leave. But I had actually done a really good job here and had really a lot of faculty following.

For Murray, his investment in others was rooted in his faith and kindness while recognizing that his first-generation identity influenced what he seeks in others, particularly staff:

> The softness and human caring, it comes with my faith. … I don't like to burn bridges. … I tried to always be kind, I always valued competence and kindness. … I think that being first gen definitely helped with all of that and that has not changed throughout my career.

Relationships, community, and investing in others manifested differently for each president, but each participant noted it as a key priority.

Mission Matters

The final trend within the theme of how first-generation presidents approach their role is an unwavering commitment to mission and that the mission of institutions matter, particularly when educating first-generation students. Ideye emphasized that at his community college, their mission is to "take the rough diamonds and we polish them, and I like that. That's one of the reasons why I've stuck to community college." After three decades in Catholic higher education, Jennings was unwilling to let go of the mission she connected so deeply with:

> But, the resonating with the mission, then that was—then you knew it was right, you know? Like with many things, people always say, "Well, you'll know when it's right," but you don't believe that when you're in it. … But then I did know and so people always say to me that, you know, they're so pleased and I always say, "Well, I'm glad we found each other."

Cook articulated the moment he realized he had found a campus where he connected distinctly with the mission during his interview for his current presidency:

> I was walking to campus that night, in my spare time, after the interview day was over with, and I wandered into the library and there was a study session going on

> with a Spanish professor giving an exam review. And so I asked about it the next day, thinking they staged this thing really well, and no, the kids just needed more and he was doing that, and I thought, "I don't know that I've ever been at an institution where that would happen," you know, just because they needed more help kind of thing.

Cook continued to explain that not only was it the individual approach that faculty took to help students learn but the type of students at his institution that drew him there and keeps him:

> I tend to be much more drawn to the Pell-eligible kid whose parents can't give them any advice at all. … That probably actually detracts from my job a little bit, because if you gave me a choice between flying to New York to talk to a donor, which I know I've got to do, and sitting down and giving career advice to this kid who has nobody at home, I'm going to lean that way every single time.

Like Cook, the type of student was key to the mission for Kearney. "The students are great… primarily from the region… we get really good students. Good in the broad sense. They're academically strong, but they're good kids, it's a good place, it's a place you can be proud of working at." Not only did presidents select their institutions due to a deep connection to the mission but they see their role as primary protector of the mission, ensuring it is preserved for future generations. Specifically, when others within the academy suggest increasing the profile of the university or attracting more competitive students, participants were the first to recommit to their purpose. They attributed their defensiveness of the mission to their first-generation identity and understanding how places like their institutions change lives. As Wright explained:

> I say this to people—we have to teach the students we have, not the ones we wish we had. So, if you complain about students being underprepared, I said, this is—we're a point of access, this is who we are, right? So, I don't want to talk about remedial classes, I want to say, well, how do we get the students to where they need to be and how do you do that?

Cook had a similar sentiment. "I have no tolerance for any of our faculty discussions over, well, we should raise the SAT profile? No, go to someplace that has a higher one because that's not who we are and what we're about." Participants also talked about this in terms of their market position. They held a deep understanding of how their institution's market position set them apart and provided a service to first-generation students. As Stephens portrayed it:

> I understand our market position, I understand who the students are we can best serve. And it's not—I'm not competing with highly selective private colleges for their band of students. I know that the hard-working, above-average, maybe not stellar SAT but aspirant student is our sweet spot. So we organize ourselves from recruitment to what we teach to what we support, we organize ourselves around our market position. We don't wish we had a different market position, we try to serve the one we're in … being first-gen has helped me in that I understand our audience, or at least a sizeable portion of our audience, the core part of the students we serve.

Throughout the theme of first-gen approaches to the presidency, participants articulated students as top priority in decision-making, placed high value and emphasis on people, relationships, and community, and reiterated that mission matters. Many

participants who selected to be part of this study work at institutions that have high proportions of first-generation students, and their willingness to participate in this research is likely not a coincidence. They were deeply committed to helping first-generation students advance and were willing to commit to that in any way they can as college presidents.

Chapter Summary

Chapter 5 outlined the themes across the narratives of college presidents who were first-generation college students. It highlighted four distinct themes that emerged from the data including (1) mentors, (2) transcending educational and career obstacles, (3) presidential pathways, and (4) approach as first-generation presidents. It also detailed the trends among the themes to provide in-depth analysis of how each theme manifested among participants. Throughout the chapter, connections were made to the factors that compelled and enabled first-generation students to transcend educational and career obstacles, the factors that helped them cultivate presidential aspirations and preparedness, and the unique ways first-generation presidents approach their roles. Chapter 6 will discuss the conclusions from this study, identify and critique its limitations, offer implications for practice, and outline suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

"I leave the college presidency and nonprofit higher education strongly affirming the relationship between mentor and student as the most powerful and influential dynamic in education. Without it, teaching and learning are merely transactional" (Durden, 2013, p. 53). Durden's perspective, written while he was retiring as a first-generation college president, highlighted a key theme of the way mentors shaped participants' stories throughout this study. It also illuminated recommendations within this chapter, which will focus on creating stronger pathways to the presidency for first-generation college students.

This chapter highlights the ways in which the nine narratives from college presidents who were first-generation college students answered the research questions in this narrative study including (1) what compelled and enabled college presidents who were first-generation college students to transcend educational and career obstacles, (2) what factors allowed college presidents who were first-generation college students to cultivate presidential aspirations and preparedness for the role, and (3) what is unique about the college presidents who were first-generation college students approach their roles as president? To answer these questions, the chapter begins with a researcher reflection followed by a discussion of the findings. It will then connect the findings to the research questions and theoretical framework while identifying implications of the study.

Finally, this chapter will include recommendations for future research and a critique the study.

Researcher Reflection

This study began with the title First in the Families: Counter-narratives of First Generation College Students Who Became College Presidents. That title made sense at the time, as I believed I was studying first-generation college students who became college presidents. As the study progressed, I realized the title was inaccurate—I was not studying first-generation college students who became college presidents, I was instead studying college presidents who persevered as first-generation college students. It is a subtle but necessary clarification. Their stories start in college, where they gained useful resiliency skills, but the research and implications focus on career progression for first-generation students instead of ways to ensure success of first-generation students while in college. The skills learned in college helped participants overcome career obstacles and led them to roles as college presidents. The other reason this distinction is important is that although participants were first-generation college students, they attended college in the 1970 and 1980s. What they experienced during college was not an accurate portrayal of modern interventions and support services for first-generation college students. This study was not intended to offer perspective on their educational experiences but instead focused on the nine individuals who counter the dominant narrative that has told them throughout their lives that they do not belong in the academy (Brown-Nagin, 2014; Durden, 2013; Engel & Tinto, 2008; Lightweis, 2014; Pascarella et al., 2004; Saenz et al., 2007). It centers their stories of achievement, perseverance, and thrivin,g which helps

advance a new narrative for first-generation students and college presidents (Harper, 2010).

Harper's (2010) anti-deficit achievement framework served this study well as its theoretical foundation. The framework was created to study Black men in STEM fields, but it adapted well for this purpose. Harper's framework pushed the researcher to shift all aspects of the research to focus not on obstacles or challenges but on overcoming them, which was not always easy. Using Harper's framework was challenging for me, because the stories of challenge and pain make for a good narrative. But those aspects of the narrative do not help us identify the skills that help individuals overcome them. Remaining true to the theoretical framework and pushing myself to continually operate in a strengths-based perspective was a useful exercise as a researcher and administrator. It pushed me to continually focus on perseverance instead of staring at struggle. As a result, the product was stronger and begins to create practical professional implications. It also recognizes and amplifies diverse pathways to the presidency.

Finally, engaging in this work as a first-generation college student was both a labor of love and an exercise in hope. I saw myself in many of the stories shared, and though I do not desire to explore a college presidency in the future, it was clear none of the participants did either when they were at my point in their career. I leave the experience affirmed by the unique career paths that led the participants to their current roles as presidents. As Stephens stated:

> I'm the last person you want to talk to about a plan because there never was. I mean, I didn't even—didn't even think I'd work in higher ed until I was 31 years old and I'd been stuffing envelopes as a temp in southern California and got the

> magic call to come back. Only had a bachelor's degree and it was just my personal relationships that got me that. There's nothing about what I did that I would advise another person to do.

Despite Stephens's account, less than two decades after stuffing envelopes as a temporary employee he was named the president of his alma mater. It was the messages of perseverance, relationships, and taking advantage of opportunity that spoke loudest, and I will carry those with me throughout my career. I only hope that other first-generation college students who find themselves working in higher education can use this research and these nine stories to do the same.

Discussion of Findings

Chapter 4 outlined the individual narratives of the nine participants, and chapter 5 identified the themes that allowed participants to transcend educational and career obstacles, that cultivated presidential aspirations and prepare for the presidency, and that addressed the unique ways in which first-generation presidents approach the presidency. As the narratives and themes in the previous two chapters identified, the factors that compel and enable college presidents who were first-generation college students to transcend educational and career obstacles included mentors, participants' demeanors, participants' families and communities, and participants' approaches to problem solving. Those same factors, combined with accidental pathways to presidency that included flexibility in career progression and decision-making, allowed participants to cultivate presidential aspirations and preparedness. The previous two chapters also identified the unique aspects of the ways participants approach their roles of president, which included an unwavering commitment to prioritizing students, investment in people and

relationships, and a deeply held connection to the mission of the type of institution they lead. Consistent with Harper's (2010) anti-deficit achievement framework, which served as the theoretical foundation for this study, the research questions and answers outlined above operate from a strengths-based perspective. These counter-narratives from first-generation college presidents supported Espino's (2014) work, which identified the community cultural wealth of Mexican American PhD students that helped participants succeed as doctoral students. The findings of this research also advance Brown-Nagin (2014)'s argument approaching first-generation students from a lens of disadvantage and underperformance. The findings create a coherent counter-narrative of college presidents who were first-generation students, noting the ways they overcame obstacles and barriers in their educational and career paths while demonstrating their own strengths and resiliency. Throughout the remainder of the discussion section I will identify ways in which participants aligned with and countered the dominant narrative of college presidents and first-generation students. I will also highlight areas where the data supports a new narrative altogether. The final section in this discussion will identify ways in which first-generation presidents in this study were uniquely prepared to be presidents based on their background and skills. I will focus on the ways that their first-generation identity served as a source of strength and preparation for the role.

Dominant Narrative Connection

One-quarter of current college presidents served as presidents of another institution prior to their current role (Gagliardi et al., 2017), which is consistent with participants in this study. Two of the nine participants are in their second presidency. The racial demographics of the participants in this study were representative of the national

sample, whereby nationally 83% of presidents are White; in this study 77% were White. This study is reflective of the gender demographics of presidents but representation in this group was below the national average for women presidents (30%) with only 11% representation from women. Consistent with all college and university presidents, participants demonstrated the skills identified to be successful for presidents including strategizing, making difficult decisions, managing conflicting priorities, and being accessible while managing uncertainty, irregularity, unpredictability, and impermanence (Legon et al., 2013; Gardner, 2016; Merton, 2012; Rabovsky & Rutherford, 2016). Participants also spoke throughout their interviews about the role mentors played in their career as well as the role mentors and networks played in their continued success as presidents, which was expected based on research. Their networks and relationships allowed participants to overcome challenges and manage the impact the role has had on them, consistent with Merten (2012) and Seltzer's (2016) recommendations for presidential success.

As first-generation students themselves, participants' accounts of families were consistent with the findings from Terezini et al. (1996), highlighting how parents can be potential barrier, but in recent years, families have been identified as a source of support (Saenz et al., 2007). Many participants identified families as supportive in their academic pursuits, and just one identified his parents as hostile toward the idea of higher education. In addition, as Saenz et al. (2007) identified, participants in this study were consistent with first-generation students in that they often choose colleges within 50 miles from their family's home. Many noted struggling to adjust to college and being taken aback by the academic challenge of college, consistent with research on adjustment for first-

generation college students (Lightweis, 2014; Saenz et al., 2007; D'Amico & Dika, 2013). In addition, although just one participant used the term "guilt" to describe their ability to succeed beyond the expectations of his small hometown, many articulated feelings consistent with guilt or shame for not staying connected with their families the way they did prior to college and career success. This is consistent with the 2014 findings from Covarrubias et al. on family achievement guilt, which is similar to the survivor guilt that comes from leaving a struggling family behind. Also consistent with the dominant narrative on first-generation students were the ways in which participants underestimated their ability to attend top institutions. Many participants were strong academics but did not explore opportunities beyond local universities, which supported Brown-Nagin's (2014) findings. One participant noted he later learned he could have gotten a full-tuition scholarship to a selective liberal arts college in his home state. Finally, the strongest way the participants in this study fit the dominant narrative on first-generation students was by relying on mentoring and relationships for success, particularly between faculty and students. Espino (2014) noted mentoring and relationships as one of the strongest ways to help those unfamiliar with the academy to succeed as academics.

A New Counter-narrative

Although there were many ways the participants supported the dominant narrative within the research on college presidents and first-generation students, there were many ways that their experiences are not represented in research. The findings from this study serve as a new counter-narrative. The first way that participants created a new counter-narrative is evident in their career paths. Gagliardi et al. (2017) noted that the most common role immediately before assuming a presidency is provost or academic dean and

that, as of 2016, 81% of college presidents were formerly full-time faculty members (EAB, 2017). Two of the nine participants, or 22%, in this study were full-time faculty members prior. In addition, just two (22%) were chief academic officers prior to assuming their role as president. One-third of the participants had no academic administration experience as a dean or provost prior to assuming their roles as president. In addition, Teker and Atan (2013) identify the continued importance of presidents coming from backgrounds as academics with a strong research agenda and history of scholarship, yet only two (22%) of participants clearly fit within that expectation. Another aspect of the ways in which participants in this study began to write a new narrative is in their career success at a young age. For example, the average age of presidents continues to rise and is currently 62 (Gagliardi et al., 2017). However, the average age of participants in this study was just 57 years old.

The number of first-generation students on college campuses is somewhere between 24% and 34% (Lightweis, 2014; Stuber, 2011). Yet for the participants who had access to that data for their current campus, the average percentage of first-generation students was 40%. These campuses serve to advance a strong counter-narrative of institutions with large populations of first-generation college students, and it is not surprising that the participants in this study have chosen to work at institutions committed to educating first-generation students. Analyzing the ways in which participants countered the dominant narrative as first-generation students themselves provided a useful counter-narrative to the body of research on first-generation students as well. Of the nine participants, just one shared that they left college for a period but later returned.

Lightweiss (2014) noted that first-generation college students leave college after their first year at a rate of 26%, which did not accurately reflect this participant sample.

Uniquely Prepared to be President

The two previous sections outlined the ways in which the participants in this study both fit the dominant narrative and also create a new counter-narrative for first-generation students and college presidents. Based on the research of what makes a successful college president as outlined in Chapter 2 of this dissertation, I argue these participants were uniquely prepared and positioned to become and excel as college presidents. Legon et al. (2013) identified that participants must win the trust of faculty to succeed as presidents, and despite the lack of academic credentials to win their trust as scholars, participants were able to use their strong transparency and effective relationship tools to win the trust of faculty. In addition, Teker and Atan (2013) identified that many college presidents struggle to adjust to the ways in which consensus-building and shared governance influence decision-making on college campuses. Many participants, however, noted that within their families and communities decisions were often made collectively, which likely assisted the participants in navigating this aspect of their roles as president. Teker and Atan (2013) also noted that in today's higher education landscape, campuses expect results from presidents forthwith. Throughout the data collected for this study, participants regularly noted their willingness to jump into new challenges and work exceptionally hard to fill learning voids to ensure success. Participants' willingness to try new things likely predisposed participants to success in their roles.

In addition to the skills necessary to be an effective president, Legon et al. (2013) also noted many personality characteristics that are beneficial for college presidents.

They noted that ability to deal with uncertainty, irregularity, unpredictability, and impermanence are keys to presidents' success. Analyzing the experience of these participants, they demonstrated a strong ability to deal with all of these aspects, often from an early age. Their experience as first-generation college students solidified their ability to maneuver uncertainty, irregularity, unpredictability, and impermanence. By the time they became presidents this was a clear strength, making them uniquely suited for the college presidency. Participants articulated necessity to maneuver insider and outsider environments throughout their lives also helps them navigate the multiple environments that are necessary for college presidents to succeed (Merten, 2012). Participants' flexibility in career discernment and progression also positioned them to become successful presidents. As Merten (2012) noted, a key to success for college presidents is to recognize when to take advantage of unforeseen opportunities to advance the campus, and although strategy is important to plotting a successful course as president, strategy must be coupled with a willingness to seize on unexpected opportunities, a trait participants articulated throughout their data that likely contributed to their success.

Critique of the Study

Although the findings from this study have many implications that will be discussed in the next section, it is important to first outline the limitations and shortcomings of this study. The first is the lack of diversity of social identities, particularly marginalized or minoritized identities. Though convenience sampling helped avoid excessive hurdles such as cost and travel (Schwandt, 2001), it limited the diversity of participants. Having just one woman and two people of color limits the data in this study. Of the 22 potential participants who were contacted, six were women and five

were people of color, which reflects the national demographics of college presidents. The majority of those who responded and participated were White men, however. In the Future Research section of this dissertation, I will recommend replicating this study with individuals who hold multiple marginalized or minoritized identities and explore the ways in which White male voices impact this current study. For example, White men in the study articulated ways in which they rose through the administrative ranks very quickly and opportunities presented themselves, but the participants did not identify the ways in which the privileged aspects of their identities may have impacted their success. In addition, White male participants often noted that mentors took an interest in them or encouraged them with little understanding of how their dominant identities may have motivated or impacted those mentoring relationships, as well as the ways that racism and sexism operate at systemic levels within higher education (Harper, 20120). Finally, it is important to look at the role privilege may have played in advancing to president. For example, the six White men who participated in the study became president for the first time at the age of 49 on average. For the woman and the men of color in the study that average age was 56. Having greater diversity in the participant pool could have allowed for further analysis and meaning of how the intersection of identities impacts college presidents who were first-generation students.

Critique of this study would be remiss without noting that for participants and within the review of literature, it was difficult to differentiate between socio-economic status and first-generation identity. Socio-economic status was not a focus of this study, nor were any questions specifically focused on that aspect of participants' identity. However, of the nine participants, eight mentioned upbringings as working-class and one

noted a middle-class upbringing despite their first-generation identity. Although socio-economic status or class was not a focus of this study, it became an important aspect of the study because many participants' identities were rooted not only in their identity as first-generation students but within the intersection of their class identity and first-generation student identity.

Implications for Practice

Throughout the conceptualization, design, literature review, and data collection and analysis for this study, I was unable to identify a resource that identified first-generation college presidents. Little research exists on this subset of college presidents, and as this study demonstrates, the population has a unique set of skills that colleges, universities, professional organizations, and boards should be seeking to foster and develop to ensure a strong transition of leadership on their campuses in the generations to come. To do this, more information is needed on first-generation college presidents. In the final section of this chapter I will recommend future research on first-generation college presidents, but prior to that I argue that the ACE study, conducted every five years, must begin to capture this demographic to help us understand the broader picture of how many first-generation college presidents exist currently in the United States and to develop a stronger body of data from which to conduct further research.

As I have argued in the Discussion of Findings section previously, after completing this study and based on the data collected, I assert that college presidents who come from a first-generation student background are uniquely prepared for the presidency and that they possess a skill-set and demeanor that sets them apart from their non-first-generation peers. Because of this, professional organizations, presidential

preparation programs, and senior university executives could benefit from building specific pipeline programs to encourage and support more first-generation college administrators to become presidents. Many participants talked of specific presidential preparation programs, some that allowed them to shadow a president for a semester or ones that met at different times throughout a calendar year in a cohort model. This could be a beneficial model for first-generation presidents to help them connect with one another and to harness their strengths by refining their skills and preparing them for the college presidency. A program of this nature specifically for first-generation college administrators would also continue to challenge the dominant narrative for first-generation students and college presidents by creating a stronger pathway to the presidency for a group of administrators who have demonstrated a unique strong set of skills. Another approach would be to create mentoring programs where first-generation college presidents could mentor first-generation administrators who strive to become president, as throughout this study the benefits and role of mentoring are repeatedly emphasized.

Another implication of this study focuses on the career discernment and preparation process for first-generation college students. Many colleges and universities emphasize career planning early and from a definitive approach, but the career paths of the participants and the well-documented success of a planned happenstance approach lends a new perspective to career-planning for first-generation students. Helping first-generation students explore all their interests and making career decisions that align with their strengths and passions but not requiring commitment to a specific career path may be a useful application of planned happenstance theory (Mitchell, 1999).

Finally, it must be reiterated that the dominant narrative of first-generation students and of college presidents only portrays a partial picture of this population. Continuing to research and approach first-generation students and/or first-generation administrators from a deficit perspective continues to perpetuate inaccuracies and is harmful to first-generation students and the enterprise of higher education. In a field that values learning and knowledge production, our field must model our ability to entertain multiple potentially conflicting narratives and elevate those to paint a fuller picture of what first-generation students and first-generation administrators bring to the academy. This research documents their strengths and benefits within higher education, and it is imperative for professionals in higher education to commit themselves to challenging a single, dominant-narrative approach as well as commit to understanding first-generation or any marginalized/minoritized population from a strengths-based, anti-deficit model that focuses on the assets these populations bring to colleges and universities.

Recommendations for Future Research

Research studies often leave the researcher with more questions than answers, as is the case with this study. There are many areas of additional research that I recommend. These recommendations stem from the findings and connections identified within this study including the unexpected findings. Most notably for future recommendation is the fact that this study was conducted on mostly White men, the study needs to be replicated while limiting participation to individuals who possess multiple marginalized and minoritized identities because this may uncover additional resiliency skills. To engage in that research, it will be important to operate from an intersectional approach. Isolating a

singular identity may not yield results as productive as those of a study that explores resiliency and persistence that result from multiple marginalized intersecting identities.

Most participants in this study preside over institutions that focus on educating first-generation students. Focusing on a similar research approach with participants who are first-generation but lead or have spent significant portions of their careers at flagships, Ivies, or highly selective private institutions may yield interesting outcomes. Specifically, these individuals can likely provide data regarding the ways in which class and academic hierarchies impact first-generation students and administrators where the participants in this study may not have been able to provide this kind of information. Presidents who fit this criterion and have been public about their first-identity status include Michael Crow at Arizona State University, Marc Tessier-Lavigne at Stanford, Amy Gutman at Penn, Biddy Martin at Amherst College, Shirley Collado at Ithaca College, and Ajay Nair at Arcadia University. Each likely has a unique perspective that could further advance an anti-deficit achievement narrative and provide a possibility model for first-generation professionals who aspire to be college presidents.

The campuses of the participants in this research were not considered in recruiting candidates. Like the suggestion of seeking out potential first-generation presidents who lead Ivy League or flagship institutions, exploring the connection between place, environment, and first-generation identities in leadership could yield beneficial research. More specifically, there were individual participants who stood out as unique case studies for the ways in which specific campus environments shaped them or prepared them for the presidency. Exploring the people and place that impacted those individuals in depth

could provide unique perspectives and beneficial research for the field of higher education.

As the researcher, I leave this research confident that there is a unique native intelligence among college presidents who were first-generation students. Additional research on this topic, both qualitative and quantitative, will help support or challenge my assertion based on the pool of participants in this study. Namely, throughout this dissertation I have noted that there is no current method for collecting data on college presidents who were first-generation students. Absent that data, the full scope of the uniqueness of these presidents' approaches and their resiliency as students and administrators remains unknown. Beginning to collect that data as part of a current study of college presidents or as a separate large-scope quantitative research project will be a benefit to the field of higher education.

Finally, there are many unexpected findings in this research including a theme of participants having backgrounds or past experiences as athletes, multiple perspectives from immigrant families, and the well-represented connection to planned happenstance theory for participants' career paths. In addition, each of the participants in this study was married to someone outside of their gender identity, leaving additional research questions about the ways in which sexual identity privilege and partnerships support a leader's persistence, resiliency, and success. Each of these areas could be studied further to explore the connections that exist among first-generation presidents and/or college presidents' writ large.

Final Thoughts

The stories and time I spent with the nine participants in this study provide an essential model of possibility and opportunity for many of us who were raised working-class and were among the first generation in our families to attend college. But more importantly, their stories provide nine unique roadmaps to the presidency. Having worked in higher education for over a decade, I have continually been told the pathway to become a president is being a provost prior. Although the numbers may still support this as the most common route to the presidency, the narratives in this study demonstrating a changing demographic and distinctly different narrative.

What stands out most, however, were the personal accounts and willingness to be vulnerable from individuals whose roles often require the opposite. Several commented that they appreciated the uninterrupted time to share their accounts and shared that recounting their narrative had therapeutic effects for them as well as for the research. As a counselor, I appreciated that perspective, but it left me with concern about the parts of one's self they must regularly cloak to be seen as presidential. Inside each of these highly successful college presidents is still the kid from a farm, the lost first-year student, the middle-school student who got beaten up regularly at school, and many who second-guessed themselves and considered dropping out of college. We do not shed these identities when we become leaders, and it is likely these experiences that make these participants effective leaders. I imagined leaving this research knowing more about how one becomes a president and what they face daily, but I did not expect to leave it being more compassionate toward the challenge of senior leaders, particularly those who come from marginalized or minoritized identities.

I was asked by one of the participants if I desired to be a college president. On the day of that interview, and on this day as I write my final reflection, a presidency is not part of my plan. It is likely not part of my plan because I had not seen a reality where that would be possible. Each of the college presidents I had interacted with prior to Dr. Durden and the nine participants in this study came from privileged backgrounds and benefitted from generations of higher education in their families. For myself and for many other first-generation college and university administrators, this collection of narratives begins shifting what reality looks like. It is my hope that this body of research can help first-generation students and administrators see themselves at the top of colleges, universities, organizations, and business.

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APPENDIX A

Interview Protocol

1. I am gathering first-generation presidents' accounts of their college experience and career progression. I appreciate you agreeing to share yours. You are welcome to start sharing your account as a college student wherever you'd like, and I would appreciate hearing about the events and experiences that were important to you as an undergraduate.

2. Share with me how you learned to navigate college life including academic expectations, social interactions, and any other aspects that were new to you as an undergraduate.

3. When you think back, is there a specific moment you recall feeling confident in your academic and/or social abilities as a college student? Tell me about that moment, and to what or whom do you contribute your confidence?

4. Was there a moment during your college experience that you recall first considered pursuing an advanced degree? Can you share with me details of that moment or process? What or who do you recall as most helpful in graduate school preparedness?

5. Can you recall for me a time as a graduate student where you felt confident in your identity as a scholar? What or who contributed to that?

6. Reflecting on your educational and career experiences, tell me about a time you imagined yourself as a college president.

   Follow Up/Probes:
   a. *What do you think allowed you to see yourself as a college president?*
   b. *After imagining yourself as a president, what helped you prepare?*
   c. *Identify for me early-career obstacles you overcame that helped you prepare for the role of president.*
   d. *Share with me any internal challenges you faced in ascending to the presidency.*

7. The college presidency is a multifaceted role with many conflicting demands. Outside of your formal education, what in your life best prepared you to fill that role?

8. Tell me about the characteristics or abilities you possess that allow you to excel as a college president in ways that your peers whose parents attended college many not. Can you describe an example of when you have used those?

9. Share with me what role does your first-generation identity play in your presidency. Perhaps, more specifically how does having a first-generation president impact your first-generation students here on campus?

10. Being at the top of an organization can be a challenging and at times isolating role to be in. I imagine being first-generation at times can impact those feelings as well. Share with me how you have been able to overcome those challenges in your role and/or what supports allow you to continue succeed in the position.

11. Reflecting back on your education and career, are there specific things you'd do differently if you had the chance to?

12. Please share anything additional that you think is an important aspect of your narrative—perhaps things I have not asked about or aspects you'd like to expand on further.

APPENDIX B

Participant Recruitment Email Sample

Dear President/Chancellor :

I am a doctoral candidate in the Department of Counseling and Human Development Services at the University of Georgia. I invite you to participate in my dissertation study under the direction of Dr. Diane Cooper entitled *First in Their Family: Counternarratives of First Generation College Students Who Became College Presidents*.

The purpose of this study is to identify counternarratives of first-generation student success. By utilizing narrative interviews, I am seeking to identify factors that contributed to the success of first-generation college students who become college presidents. You have been recruited for this study due to your current or previous role as a college president and your presumed first-generation student status.

Your participation will involve one 90-minute interview on a convenient time and date between June 26-September 29, 2017. Interviews can occur in your office or at a location of your convenience. Interview questions will be provided via e-mail in advance of the interview. If you would like additional information about this study, please feel free to contact me 608-345-4665 or paquette@uga.edu. You can also contact my faculty sponsor, Dr. Diane Cooper at 706-542-1812 or dlcooper@uga.edu with any questions or concerns.

Thank you for your consideration and I look forward to hearing from you regarding your willingness to participate. Please contact me if you wish to be removed from future e-mails regarding this study.

Sincerely,

Peter Paquette
Doctoral Candidate
College of Education
University of Georgia

APPENDIX C

Informed Consent

UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA CONSENT FORM

FIRST IN THEIR FAMILIES: COUNTERNARRATIVES OF FIRST GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS WHO BECAME COLLEGE PRESIDENTS

Researcher's Statement

I am asking you to take part in a research study. Before you decide to participate in this study, it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. This document is designed to give you the information about the study so you can decide whether to participate in the study or not. Please take the time to read the following information carefully. Please ask if there is anything that is not clear or if you need more information. When all your questions have been answered, you can decide if you want to be in the study or not. This process is called "informed consent." A copy of this form will be given to you.

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Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to identify factors that contribute to the skills of first-generation college students in becoming college presidents and make meaning of navigating social class. The study seeks to answer the following questions:

- What compelled and enabled first-generation college students who became college presidents to transcend educational and career obstacles?
- What factors allowed first-generation college students who became college presidents to cultivate presidential aspirations and preparedness for the role?
- What is unique about the ways first-generation college students who became college presidents approach their roles as president?

Study Procedures

If you agree to participate, you will:

- Participate in a 90 minute face-to-face interview on your campus or at a location convenient for you.
- Reserve a two-hour window of time for the 90 minute interview to ensure interview completion.

- Be provided interview questions in advance of the interview via e-mail.
- Allow your interview to be audio-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed via qualitative methods.
- Be given the opportunity to review your transcript for accuracy
- Receive a final copy of the data collected for the dissertation
- Agree to have the data presented at conferences and/or submitted for publications

Risks and discomforts
There are minimal risks or discomforts. There is the potential that colleagues may see you interact with the interviewer, but in all written reports confidentiality will be maintained.

Benefits
This research can help diversity potential pathways to the presidency, as well as provide a counternarrative for first-generation students. It will highlight mechanisms that support success instead of identifying on-going underperformance of first-generation students. In addition, it has the potential to identify additional support approaches and pathways to success for first-generation student and faculty/staff/administrators at colleges and university. Additionally, this research will allow participants to give voice through research of the inherent complexities of the college and university presidency today.

Alternatives
There are no experimental treatments, interventions, or non-experimental alternative treatments. If participants wish to participate via skype in lieu of an in-person meeting that can be arranged.

Incentives for participation
There are no incentives for participation.

Audio Recording and Photo Documentation
An audio recording will occur for transcription and analysis purposes. All data will be held in strict confidence and kept secure. When and if appropriate, the researcher may take photographs in the participant's office, however all photographs will be of physical space and will not include individuals or identifying information.

Initial if you agree to audio recording and/or photo documentation. Participants should initial 2 of the 4 boxes:

	I am willing to have this interview audio recorded		*I am not willing to have this interview recorded*
	I am willing to have photographs taken of my office		*I am not willing to have photographs taken*

Privacy/Confidentiality
Demographic data of participants including race/ethnicity, gender, and any other identities participants wish to share will be collected and reported in the report. Data will

be kept confident and all interviewees will be given pseudonyms or described in broad general terms to not reveal their name or institution.

Taking part is voluntary
Participation is voluntary and participants may refuse to participate before the study begins or discontinue participation at any time with no penalty. If an interviewee withdraws from the study while in progress, the data collected will not be utilized.

If you have questions
The main researcher conducting this study is Peter Paquette, under the supervision of Dr. Diane Cooper at the University of Georgia. Please ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact *Peter Paquette at 608-345-4665 or* paquette@uga.edu *or Dr. Diane Cooper at 706-542-1812 or* dlcooper@uga.edu. If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a research participant in this study, you may contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) Chairperson at 706.542.3199 or irb@uga.edu.

Research Subject's Consent to Participate in Research:
To voluntarily agree to take part in this study, you must sign on the line below. Your signature below indicates that you have read or had read to you this entire consent form, and have had all of your questions answered.

_____	_____	_____
Name of Researcher	Signature	Date
_____	_____	_____
Name of Participant	Signature	Date

Please sign both copies, keep one and return one to the researcher.