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**A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF PRIVATE LIBERAL ARTS COLLEGE
PRESIDENTS' LEADERSHIP EXPERIENCES THROUGHOUT THE
COMMONWEALTH OF PENNSYLVANIA**

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ABSTRACT

Minimal research has explored the leadership experiences of private liberal arts college presidents. The work of a college president is much more challenging and complex than at any time in our modern era. A literature review defined the college president's complex role and the importance of their leadership performance to support institutional effectiveness. Yet, there has been dismal inquiry regarding leadership experiences, perceived challenges, leadership skills, and professional experiences, to support the role of the contemporary college president in the 21st century. Focusing on small private liberal arts colleges throughout the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, this qualitative phenomenological study sought to answer the following: How do private liberal arts college presidents perceive and describe their leadership experience? This phenomenological study was conducted with N = 10 presidents (served in their role for at least 1 year), N = 1 semi-structured interview and interview notes. Colaizzi's distinctive 7-step process was used to rigorously analyze the data. Five themes arose from this iterative, qualitative analysis: (a) perceived challenges of a college president, (b) critical experiences for college presidents, (c) impactful factors on leadership, (d) critical leadership skills for college presidents, and (e) leadership experiences of a college president. Each theme encompassed several subthemes and codes. As more private liberal arts college presidents retire, collecting information about their leadership experiences and challenges will contribute to the contemporary higher education landscape by enhancing workforce education and improving understanding of the complex and unique role of college presidents at private liberal arts colleges in the 21st century.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES	vii
LIST OF TABLES	viii
Chapter 1 Introduction	1
Statement of research problem	3
Significance of the study.....	6
Research questions.....	7
Overview of methodology	8
Potential delimitations and limitations.....	9
Researcher perspective	11
Summary	12
Chapter 2 Review of Literature.....	13
Search strategy and inclusion criteria	14
Defining the role of a private liberal arts college president.....	14
Leadership theories	18
Trait theory.....	19
Power and influence theory	20
Behavior theory	21
Contingency theory.....	21
Path-goal theory.....	22
Leadership experiences of college and university presidents	23
College presidency challenges.....	28
Chapter summary	31
Chapter 3 Methodology	33
Research design	33
Qualitative study.....	34
Phenomenology	34
Population sample.....	36
Data collection	39
Research questions.....	41
Pilot study	43
Data analysis	43
Coding procedures	46
Triangulation.....	47
Member checking	48
Summary.....	48

Chapter 4 Results	50
Introduction.....	50
Demographics	51
Data collection	52
Data analysis.....	53
Coding procedures	54
Trustworthiness.....	57
Credibility	57
Transferability.....	57
Dependability.....	58
Confirmability.....	58
Emerging themes	58
Subquestion 1.....	60
Challenges.....	61
Steps to meet challenges.....	63
Synthesis of perceived challenges of a college president theme	64
Subquestion 2.....	65
College experiences	65
Leadership experiences.....	66
Advice for aspiring college presidents	68
Synthesis of critical experiences for college presidents theme.....	70
Subquestion 3.....	71
Core values	71
Changes in leadership style	74
Adapting leadership style	75
Synthesis of impactful factors on leadership theme	77
Subquestion 4.....	77
Skills	78
Leadership style	79
Synthesis of critical leadership skills for college presidents theme	82
Overarching Research Question	82
Conclusion	85
Chapter 5 Conclusions, Recommendations, and Limitations	88
Introduction.....	88
Interpretations of findings.....	90
Conclusions supporting Subquestion 1.....	94
Challenges.....	94
Steps to meet challenges	95
Conclusions supporting Subquestion 2.....	96
College experience.....	97
Leadership experience	98
Advice for aspiring college presidents.....	100

Conclusions supporting Subquestion 3.....	101
Core values.....	102
Changes in leadership style and adapting leadership style	103
Conclusions supporting Subquestion 4.....	104
Leadership skills	105
Leadership styles.....	107
Conclusions supporting the overarching research question.....	108
Recommendations for future studies	109
Limitations	110
Conclusions.....	111
References.....	116
Appendix A Exemption Determination.....	125
Appendix B Sample Participant Letter	126
Appendix C Letter to Participants.....	128
Appendix D Webb – Leadership Experiences of Presidents at Private Liberal Arts Institutions Interview Protocol	129

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 4-1: Procedures of Colaizzi's phenomenological descriptive method	54
Figure 4-2: Word cloud	55
Figure 4-3: Tree map.....	56
Figure 5-1: College president leadership experiences	90

LIST OF TABLES

Table 3-1: Research Questions Corresponding With Interview Questions.....	42
Table 3-2: Steps in Colaizzi's Descriptive Phenomenological Method.....	45
Table 4-1: Participants' Interview Details.....	53

Chapter 1

Introduction

In the 21st century, higher education presidents must demonstrate the ability to navigate various internal and external stakeholder groups through a period of constant change. New research from Higher Education Publication, Inc. reported that from 2018–2021 college presidents or chancellors had a 36% turnover rate, with 1,502 out of 4,135 presidents being new in their position each year between 2018 and 2021 (College Administrator Data/Turnover Rates: 2018-Present, 2021) . According to R. William Funk, chief executive officer of R. William Funk & Associates,

There has recently been a spate of presidents stepping down or retiring under a cloud of controversy. In some cases, the departure of the president has been hastened by wrongful deeds perpetuated by subordinates, and others are victims of greater student and faculty activists, board dysfunction, or the accumulation of controversial decisions they have made. Rightly or wrongly, the buck stops at the feet of the president. (as cited in College Administrator Data/Turnover Rates: 2018-Present, 2021).

According to MacTaggart (2017), “the work of the contemporary American college or university president is much more challenging than at any time in the modern era” (p. 21).

College presidents are expected to have the leadership skills needed to help the institution operate efficiently and successfully, ultimately improving the institution’s bottom line.

According to Lick (2002),

Leadership and management in higher education are quite different but complementary functions, and both are critical. The key is to have the proper balance between effective

management and visionary leadership. Unfortunately, in higher education we often have an imbalance, with too much emphasis on management and not enough on transforming leadership. In simple terms, management is about “doing things right” – that is, working in a given paradigm to make things better. In contrast, leadership is about “doing the right thing – that is, shifting a paradigm from “what is” to “what should be” (p. 32).

Leadership is considered an influence process through which leaders should seek constructive change while demonstrating the ability to establish a shared mission and vision across the organization. According to Rhodes (1998), “the college presidency is one of the most influential of all positions because the future leaders of the world sit in our classrooms” (p. 1). College presidents face vast challenges, with demands from the board of trustees, faculty, staff, alumni, community partners, administrative units, students, and parents. In addition, an environment characterized by constant technological change makes creativity a critical skill for enhancing the institution. Over time, scholars have identified the impact of good leadership demonstrated by college presidents who improve institutional performance. This study was an exploration of the leadership experiences and challenges faced by private liberal arts college presidents throughout the commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

There were 32 private liberal arts colleges operating in Pennsylvania at the time of this study. Liberal arts institutions emphasize a well-rounded education, which supports the cross-disciplinary education of a variety of subject matters in the study arts. According to Grove (2019), “a liberal arts college is a 4-year institution of higher education with a focus on undergraduate programs of study that lead to a bachelor's degree” (p. 1). Private liberal arts institutions offer small class sizes, promote critical thinking and problem solving, offer a variety of courses to support the intellectual curiosity of students, and reside in small towns or cities.

Most literature about presidential leadership experiences has focused on community college presidents. Few scholarly researchers have examined the leadership experiences of private liberal arts college presidents. Private liberal arts colleges face unique challenges, which differ from those community colleges and public institutions. Most notably, the cost of tuition at private liberal arts colleges differs significantly from public institutions. The economic driving force for most private institutions comes from student tuition, room, and board. Docking and Curton (2015) stated: “during the past ten years, at least thirty institutions have closed their doors. Before closing, these colleges had an average life span of eighty-seven years” (p. 13). With the growing complexity of the role of the private liberal arts college president, they must lead effectively to obtain resources, increase philanthropic support, create a culture that supports the recruitment and development of individuals at all levels, foster innovation to support institutional change, and communicate a shared vision to promote the school’s values and mission. This study was an exploration of the leadership experiences of private liberal arts college presidents. The aim was to provide insight into leadership experiences that may help prepare the next generation of private liberal arts college presidents. The researcher sought responses from participants on common leadership experiences, perceived challenges, and professional experiences critical for future private liberal arts college presidents.

Statement of research problem

With more than half (54%) of today’s college presidents expected to step down within the next 5 years (Gagliardi et al., 2017), new leaders will benefit from understanding what leadership skills they will need to formulate strategy, make difficult decisions, and change the institutional

culture in a period of rapid change. They should also understand how college presidents effectively lead their institutions while balancing the many complexities associated with this position. Vecchio (2007) posited: “Leadership is often regarded as the single most critical factor in the success or failure of institutions” (p. 11). Richard Ekman, president of the Council of Independent Colleges, suggested

most of the leadership change at private colleges is due to retirements, but some of the turnovers are related to the difficulty of their job, and boards that are sometimes hyperactive in their expectations of the president and insist on every sudden change. (Hammond, 2013)

The college president’s role has become increasingly challenging to keep current with the changing higher education landscape, increased competitiveness to attract students; difficulties with staff recruiting; the need for diversity, equity, and inclusion; and rising tuition costs. Tractenberg et al. (2013) stated that “during 2009 and 2010, fifty college, university, and system presidents resigned, retired prematurely, or were fired” (p. 37). Previous research validated the increasingly difficult and complex role of the college president, but aspiring college presidents would benefit from understanding leadership experiences, perceived challenges, and professional skill attainment to be effective in this role so they can develop the leadership skills needed to advance small private liberal arts institutions.

College presidents must create a vision on how to move the institution forward and demonstrate the ability to respond to unforeseen challenges. They must build trust and create a shared vision for positive student outcomes. Throughout the last decade, the college president’s role has become much more complex. According to Gross (2018),

the challenges are wide-ranging from fundraising and “friendraising” to quests for academic excellence and its quality measurement, from developing a healthy culture on campus without sexual assault and harassment to access and financial support for students who are not from wealthy families or elite high schools and prep schools. (p. 2)

College presidents at small private liberal arts institutions are also challenged with supporting and sustaining institutional effectiveness. These presidents must hire and develop administrator’s adept at supporting the institution’s mission and vision with fewer resources; decreased enrollments; increased competition recruiting faculty, staff, and students; changing student demographics; marketing; and other issues and concerns influencing higher education institutions. Few researchers have focused on identifying the essence of leadership characteristics used by private liberal arts college presidents as they manage, recruit, fundraise, and lead in creative and innovative ways to support the growth and development of their institutions.

As more private liberal arts college presidents retire, understanding their leadership experiences, perceived challenges, and professional experiences will contribute to the field of workforce education and development for future aspiring private liberal arts college presidents. Using a phenomenological study to learn about the leadership perceptions of college presidents at private liberal arts institutions, the researcher applied the interpretive framework of descriptive phenomenology by interviewing each participant to ask semistructured, open-ended questions. According to Max Van Manen (1990),

The essence of a phenomenon is universal which can be described through a study of the structure that governs the instances or particular manifestation of the essence of that phenomenon. . . . A universal or essence may only be intuited or grasped through a study of the particulars or instances as they are encountered in lived experiences. (p. 10)

This method allowed the participants to openly describe the leadership experiences, perceived challenges, and professional experiences that had helped them lead their institutions. The findings add to the body of knowledge on college presidents' leadership characteristics at private liberal arts institutions.

Significance of the study

This study was an exploration of the leadership experiences of private liberal arts college presidents in the commonwealth of Pennsylvania. The researcher sought to understand how private liberal arts college presidents lead their respective institutions. College presidents are challenged with making difficult decisions daily, so more could be understood about how private liberal arts college presidents effectively lead their institutions, how they deal with common challenges, and what professional experiences they suggest for aspiring private liberal arts college presidents.

Today's college presidents require a different type of leader to be effective. MacTaggart (2017) suggested:

American higher education must redefine the work of its presidents if it is to meet today's challenges and those fast approaching on the horizon. The effectiveness and, in a growing number of cases, the very survival of a college or university requires leaders who make a clear-eyed appraisal of their institution's competitive position in the market for higher

education services, bring an entrepreneurial spirit to their work, and possess the talent to advance the enterprise in the face of often conflicting demands. (p. 1)

Although MacTaggart (2017) provided information on specific skills and attributes higher education leaders should possess, the purpose of this research was to explore the perceived leadership experience of college presidents at private liberal arts colleges throughout the commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Exploring the leadership experience of private liberal arts college presidents can help identify effective leadership skills needed to foster innovation aimed at managing and stimulating change to support the growth and development of private liberal arts institutions. The results from this research study provide information on leadership best practices and skill attainment for future aspiring private liberal arts college presidents.

Research questions

Strauss and Corbin (1998) stated that qualitative research “can refer to research about persons’ lives, lived experiences, behaviors, emotions, and feelings as well as about organizational functioning, social movement, culture phenomena, and interactions between nations” (p. 11). The following primary research question guided this study:

- How do private liberal arts college presidents perceive and describe their leadership experience?

The following subquestions further defined the study direction:

- SQ1: What are the perceived challenges associated with being a college president at a private liberal arts institution?

- SQ2: What statements describe the professional experiences future private liberal arts college presidents must possess?
- SQ3: What factors do college presidents believe impact their leadership?
- SQ4: What are the leadership skills that college presidents believe are most critical for responding to the challenges of their job?

Overview of methodology

This research study was conducted using a qualitative approach. Strauss and Corbin (1998) defined *qualitative research* as “any type of research that produces findings not arrived at by statistical procedures or other means of quantification” (p. 10). Phenomenology served as the theoretical framework for this study through an empirical phenomenological approach. Moustakas (1994a) pointed out that the “empirical phenomenological approach involves a return to experience to obtain comprehensive descriptions that provide the basis for a reflective structural analysis that portrays the essence of the experience” (p. 13). Researchers have successfully applied similar qualitative approaches to research in the study of leadership experiences within an organization (Cech, 2010; Kolomitz, 2016; Louie, 2007; McGraw, 2016; Weaver, 2005).

Thirty small private liberal arts colleges operated in Pennsylvania at the time of this study. During the fall of 2020, 15 college presidents from small private liberal arts colleges, who

had served in the presidency role for at least 1 year, were invited to participate in this study. The target sample size was 10 college presidents or enough to reach the point of information saturation. The researcher interviewed 10 presidents via Zoom. The sample included individuals with a diverse set of career and educational experiences. An interview protocol was implemented to strengthen validity and trustworthiness. Data was collected through interviews and note-taking. Data were analyzed through the process of transcription, bracketing, and coding.

Potential delimitations and limitations

The term *delimitations* refers to a study's boundaries. This study was delimited to private liberal arts college presidents located in the commonwealth of Pennsylvania. The researcher sought participants who had been in the college president role for at least 1 year.

The term *limitations* refers to a study's potential weaknesses that exist out of the researcher's control. Several limitations presented potential barriers to this study's success; however, the researcher took precautions to overcome them. The researcher anticipated that it could be difficult to gain access to participants, so presidents were chosen based on their willingness to participate.

The researcher belonged to the Pennsylvania Black Conference on Higher Education, which consists of faculty, staff, and administrators from various institutions throughout Pennsylvania. Therefore, the researcher identified potential participants using nominated sampling based on personal recommendations from trusted colleagues in the conference. Some

of these individuals had worked directly or indirectly with private liberal arts college presidents and helped the researcher with an introduction.

In interviews with senior-level leaders, researchers risk collecting non-truthful answers pertaining to negative experiences a president encountered at their institution. The researcher ensured confidentiality by keeping all responses anonymous. Participants in this study came from all educational and career levels and experiences, and their institutions varied across student enrollment, success, tuition, and financial stability. The researcher addressed these limitations by identifying private liberal arts institutions throughout the commonwealth of Pennsylvania with enrollment populations of 1,000–2,000 students. In addition, the researcher traveled to each institution to conduct face-to-face interviews. This approach allowed participants to feel more comfortable in their own space and helped the researcher establish a positive relationship and reciprocity with each participant.

For this study, the researcher used a phenomenological qualitative design to explore participants' lived experiences and how the participants described them. When conducting a phenomenological study, a researcher should know how to learn from the experiences of others. Scholars often describe phenomenology as the study of phenomena as they manifest in an individual's experience, the way we perceive and understand phenomena, and the meaning phenomena have in our subjective experience (Smith, 2013). The researcher implemented effective listening skills, remained cognizant of the importance of understanding the participants' perspectives from their lived experiences, ensured there were no external controls or manipulations of the natural phenomena, and focused the qualitative analysis collected from the semistructured interviews on understanding the presidents' leadership experiences.

Researcher perspective

I conducted this study for personal, academic, and professional reasons. As a midlevel higher education director, I have positioned myself to become a university or college president. My goals are grounded by my desire to have the greatest impact on students and how they are educated. In my current position as director of student affairs, I oversee the areas of veteran affairs, off-campus housing, diversity, international programs, the aspiring scholars program, the pathway to success summer start program, northeast region global programs, student success and retention, admissions, student aid, athletics, health and counseling services, residence life, campus life, and commuter services. In addition, I lead campus-wide initiatives and oversee programs, services, and experiential learning opportunities to foster higher levels of student engagement, diversity, retention, and success. Throughout my experience in higher education, I have viewed establishing positive relationships with multiple campus constituent groups as critical to effectively leading a unit, department, division, and institution. By establishing positive relationships, I have gained buy-in from multiple campus constituent groups that have helped to implement campus-wide programs to enhance student recruitment and retention initiatives.

In my experience working directly with college presidents, I have seen that the most effective president is grateful for and committed to their job. As a leader within the division of student affairs, I have employed a servant leadership approach when working with my staff. I have also provided the attention and support needed for students, faculty, and staff to succeed, inspiring trust and confidence through a charismatic power approach. According to Vecchio (2007), “leaders make a difference in their subordinates’ satisfaction and performance. Leaders can also make the difference in whether their organizations succeed or fail” (p. 32). As an

aspiring college president, I wanted to learn and understand what leadership characteristics private liberal arts college presidents employed, what they perceived as challenges, and what professional experiences were critical for their success. I have come to see innovation and creativity as frameworks supporting higher education institutions in the 21st century, and I would be honored to have the privilege one day of leading an institution to establish a culture that regularly inspires positive improvements and supports the growth, development, and success of all students, faculty, and staff.

Summary

This introductory chapter provided information on the impact college presidents have on their institutions, including the complex challenges college presidents face in an era of constant change. The chapter also addressed the need to conduct a qualitative, phenomenological study examining the leadership perspectives of college presidents at private liberal arts institutions. Research questions supporting the study focus were provided along with a discussion of the intent to contribute to the field of higher education leadership. The researcher identified potential delimitations and limitations and reviewed the researcher's perspective, which provided information on the researcher's work experience in higher education, higher education leadership beliefs and experiences, and interest in pursuing this study.

Chapter 2

Review of Literature

This research involved five areas of focus: a) the leadership perspectives of private liberal arts college presidents to describe the phenomena and the essence of their lived experiences, b) the perceived challenges associated with being a college president at a private liberal arts institution, c) the professional experiences private liberal arts college presidents believed future presidents must possess, d) the factors private liberal arts college presidents believed impacted their leadership, and e) the leadership skills college presidents believed they needed to respond to the job's challenges.

This literature review included studies aimed at defining the role of a private liberal arts college president. There had been much research conducted on this topic (Birnbaum, 1989; Cohen & March, 1974; Gagliardi et al., 2017; Gross, 2018; Langbert, 2012; Morill, 2010; Spendlove, 2007), with some primarily focusing on community college presidents (Amey et. al. 2002; Nevarez & Wood, 2010; Weisman & Vaughn, 2007; Stout-Stewart, 2005). However, few researchers had focused on the leadership experiences of private liberal arts college presidents. This literature review contains sections on (a) search strategy and inclusion criteria, (b) defining the role of the private liberal arts president, (c) leadership theories of college and university presidents, (d) college presidency challenges, and (e) summary.

Search strategy and inclusion criteria

A search was conducted between May 2019 and September 2019 to identify pertinent empirical literature on college presidency leadership using multiple databases accessible through EBSCO Host, Google Scholar, and ProQuest. In addition, the search included several book chapters. The following databases offered the most useful, applicable, and relevant results for the literature review: Sage Journals Online, ProQuest, and Wiley Online Library. The study included the following keywords: *college presidency*, *leadership in higher education*, *private liberal arts college presidents*, *higher education* and *liberal arts*, and *leadership* and *presidency*.

The term “college presidency” resulted in over 629 results from scholarly articles, peer-reviews, and books. However, adding the terms “leadership” and “presidency” narrowed the results to over 333 sources from scholarly articles, peer-reviews, and books. To refine the search results, a new search using the terms “private liberal arts college president” was used, which produced 100 results from scholarly articles, peer-reviews, and books. The searches for this review produced a wealth of results—many of which were not applicable for the intent of this literature review. The final list of sources included 18 scholarly articles and peer-reviews and seven books focused on leadership styles and characteristics. Once identified, each article was synthesized to identify themes to better support this literature review. In addition, several other relevant articles were identified from the reference pages of those articles.

Defining the role of a private liberal arts college president

Private institutions have existed since the early 17th and 18th centuries. Most notable, Harvard University, which was founded in 1636 as Harvard College, was the first private

institution in the United States. Pennsylvania has 32 small private liberal arts institutions spread throughout the commonwealth. These institutions enroll an undergraduate population of anywhere between 800 and 4,000 students. For many U.S. colleges and universities, especially private institutions, rising tuition cost represents a primary concern as institutions work to offset declining revenues from internal and external sources. The role of the college presidency is complex, and it varies depending upon the particular institution. College presidents should possess a set of skills, abilities, and knowledge that supports their role in this leadership position. According to a 2016 study conducted by the American Council on Education (ACE), about half of small and midsize college leaders planned to leave their institutions within the next 5 years, and half of those individuals intended to retire. MaryAnn Baenninger, president of Drew University in New Jersey, stated: “On the one hand, navigating a presidency is harder than ever. So, experience counts. A president has to be able to nail challenges in communications and emergency management without time to practice on the job” (as cited in Quintana, 2018). The college president plays many roles on a college or university campus. Bowles (2013), who spent a year studying the role of the presidency in higher education as an ACE fellow, compared the role of a college president to many other professional careers outside of higher education. The following represent a few of these comparisons.

- A president is like a minister. It is a calling.
- A president, like a police officer, protects and serves.
- A president acts like a psychologist; they know how to carefully listen to problems, maintain composure, and have the high emotional intelligence to read people.

- A president is like a boxer, they are constantly on, and many people want a piece of their time. Their work requires the agility, stamina, and fitness of a boxer and the ability to take a punch both physically and metaphorically.
- A president is like a Nobel laureate; they must display the intelligence that synthesizes and applies knowledge in a visionary way to create strategies for success and distinction.

Bowles's (2013) description of the college president's role demonstrates that a president cannot be one-dimensional. They must be many different things to many different people during many different times throughout their presidency. Bowles indicated that the length of a president's tenure has dropped to 5 years or less, asking, "Are there only a few people who fit this bill? Is the job more difficult and more complicated? Are expectations too high? Probably, yes" (p. 5).

Most notably, a recent study conducted by the United Negro College Fund (UNCF) Exemplary Transformational Leadership Survey found that presidents at private historically Black colleges and universities believe that transformational leadership is critical to effectively lead their institutions. Findings from the survey indicated that private historically Black college and university presidents believed they must be "motivational, visionary, risk-takers, mission-focused, excellent communicators, courageous and adaptive, and they must have integrity and respect for employees" (Harris, 2014, p. 5). Regardless of institution type, presidents influence student, faculty, and staff experiences on their campuses. In an era of constant change, presidents must be able to guide institutions through innovation. However, private liberal arts college presidents are tasked with additional challenges for leading their campuses. Most private institutions consist of board members who are alumni who draw on personal experiences with

the institution to formulate their agendas on how the institution should be led. According to Seltzer (2018), “privately, some presidents will say it can be difficult to smooth tensions and implement change at liberal arts institutions that have long, storied histories” (p. 1).

In an era of constant change, college presidents should incorporate a mix of different qualities and expectations specific to the institution’s needs. Shokan (2012) explained:

Performance, social matching, and institutional characteristics influence the tenure, or length of service, of private college and university presidents. There are two kinds of performance that differentially impact their tenure: The first is the incremental improvement of standards with respect to, for example, entering SAT scores. The second is the dramatic turnaround in which a president either strategically reorients his institution or significantly improves its efficiency, resulting in sharp improvement in the performance of a weak or failing institution. (p. 1)

For presidents at small private liberal arts institutions, flat or decreasing student enrollment trends have posed challenges over the past decade. These institutions do not have as many high-caliber academic achieving students in their application pool as at private Ivy League institutions. Identifying ways to increase enrollment while also enrolling high-achieving academic students represents a challenge. In a recent study published by ACE and the Teachers Insurance and Annuity Association of America, researchers explored the evolving nature of the college presidency. The eighth edition of the ACPS studied the responses of 1,546 college and university presidents, the results from this study identified the following key topics: college and university presidents’ demographic profiles; their duties and responsibilities, their perspectives on diversity, equity, and inclusion; and their thoughts on the future (Gagliardi, 2017, p. 2). In addition, the authors found that effective presidents are those who can collect and analyze

institutional data to develop a deeper understanding of the entire student lifecycle. This approach allows college presidents to make data-driven decisions to support the institution's overall enrollment. In light of the study results, Gagliardi suggested:

College and university presidents are being pulled in different directions than their predecessors. Chief among their responsibilities is the need to guide their institutions through a series of transformational changes that will ensure their impact long into the future. This ultimately means serving the student of the 21st century, reinventing academic programs and student services, and reconsidering finance models. To do this, presidents will have to harness the analytics revolution on behalf of the entire campus community. (p. 4)

This is where the leadership experience of college presidents plays a critical role in communicating a shared mission and vision across all campus constituent groups—to support student success and sustainability. Effective leadership from the president can help faculty, staff, and administrators gain buy-in and reduce resistance to change from key stakeholder groups. Presidents who consider their role from a symbolic perspective are less concerned about their overall leadership impact on the institution but focus their efforts on making marginal improvements and justifying these decisions to key campus constituent groups (Bensimon et al., 1989).

Leadership theories

Leadership is a complex process defined by many dimensions. Over time, scholars have provided many definitions for leadership: “There are almost as many different definitions of

leadership as there are people who have tried to define it” (Northouse, 2016, p. 2). Birnbaum, (1989) conducted a 5-year longitudinal study through the National Center for Postsecondary Governance and Finance to analyze the implicit leadership theories of college and university presidents. Birnbaum (1989) implemented the following implied leadership theories of college and university presidents: (a) trait, (b) power and influence, (c) behavior, (d) contingency, and (e) path-goal. The results from this study implied that the president’s perceptions of leadership are a process of influence, and leadership behavior emphasizes goals. Most notably, influence refers to the process of exchange involving a shared responsibility to achieve the institutions goals. In an era of constant change, “one of the most encompassing approaches to leadership—transformational leadership—is concerned with the process of how certain leaders can inspire followers to accomplish great things” (Northouse, 2016, p. 190). Since the late 1970s, the transformational approach to leadership has been the focus of substantial academic research (Northouse, 2001). Researchers who study college presidents’ leadership experiences must understand how theory informs leadership practice.

Trait theory

Formulation of the trait theory represents one of the first systematic attempts to study and better understand what makes people great leaders. Initially, scholars believed that great leaders were born with the specific characteristics needed to lead, also known as the “great man” theory. However, in the mid-20th century, the great man theory was challenged and eventually evolved to be known as trait theory. Further research disproved the idea that leaders are born (Bennis &

Nanus, 1986; Stogdill, 1974), suggesting leadership is a learned skill and has little to do with genetic inheritance. Giese and Stogdill (1974) asserted:

Letting workers know what to expect and what is expected of them is the only leadership quality that encourages productivity along with group cohesiveness and worker satisfaction. This is the central factor of leadership, and philosophies of leadership and training methods that undermine this factor destroy the very foundation of leadership. (p. 2)

Power and influence theory

Power and influence theorists focus on the amount of power available to leaders and how they exercise this power over followers through one-sided or collaborative exchange interactions. Power refers to the capacity for leaders to influence followers. Birnbaum (1989) identified two major theoretical orientations to power and influence. The first orientation involves the leader's ability to use various sources of social power to influence others. The second orientation involves the leader's interactions with followers, which results in an attempt to establish mutual influence through what Birnbaum called social exchange:

While social power theories emphasize one-way influence, social exchange theories emphasize two-way mutual influence and reciprocal relationships between leaders who provide needed services to a group in exchange for the group's approval and compliance with the leader's demands. (p. 129)

Behavior theory

Behavior theorists focus on what leaders do rather than who they are, emphasizing two key behaviors: task behavior and relationship behavior. The effects on a leader's behavior and their relationship determine their leadership behavior. Northouse (2015) suggested: "Since leadership requires both task and process behaviors, the challenge for leaders is to know the best way to combine them in their efforts to reach a goal" (p. 6).

Contingency theory

The premise of contingency theory involves the match between leadership style and a specific situation. Contingency theorists highlight the ability of an effective leader to adapt their leadership style to meet a situation's requirements. In Fiedler's contingency theory, he suggested that "leadership effectiveness is a function of the interaction between the leader and the leadership situation" (Peters et al., 1985, p. 274). According to Bensimon et al. (1989), contingency theory "suggests that the most effective way of improving leadership is not to change a person's style of leadership but to place leaders into positions suitable to their leadership orientation" (p. 16).

Path-goal theory

Path-goal theorists study how leaders motivate followers to accomplish individual or organizational goals. According to Northouse (2016), path-goal theory “is designed to explain how leaders can help followers along the path to their goals by selecting specific behaviors that are best suited to the followers’ needs and to the situation in which followers are working” (p. 116). This theory resembles contingency theory, with an additional focus on the leader’s ability to identify what motivates their followers to help them achieve their goals. To effectively implement this theory, leaders must be competent in their ability to “understand fully the goals of each follower and the rewards associated with the goals” (Northouse, 2016, p. 116). The four major components of path-goal theory include directive, supportive, participative, and achievement-oriented leadership styles. To support each component, a leader must help their followers by directing, coaching, and guiding them to achieve their stated goals. When studying leadership in colleges and universities, it can be challenging to control various systems with unknown characteristics. However, according to Bensimon et al. (1989):

Research and commentaries on the presidency suggest that presidents tend to accept a traditional and directive view when they define their leadership role; few appear to emphasize the importance of two-way communication or social exchange process of mutual influence or to identify leadership as facilitating rather than directing the work of highly educated professionals. (p. 6)

Leadership experiences of college and university presidents

Higher education in America changes with new technology, teaching pedagogies, student demographics, federal and state financial aid guidelines, student mental health, student conduct policies, academic integrity, Title 9 requirements, athletics, fundraising, and enrollment management. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, protests against racism, police brutality, and the senseless killing of George Floyd undoubtedly increased issues facing upper level administrators since the spring of 2019. According to an ACE survey conducted between April and July of 2020, the most pressing issues for presidents include long-term financial viability, the mental health of students, faculty and staff, and sustaining an online learning environment (as cited in Callow, 2021, p. 1). According to Larry Lad, a senior consultant at the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges, “Leadership is situational and presidents who were put into place to make incremental changes in a relatively stable environment can no longer count on the same set of skills to carry them through the coming months in years” (as cited in Callow, 2021, p. 1).

The role of a college president is more complex than ever. Kolomitz (2016) conducted a phenomenological study on the lived experience of new presidents at small private institutions working to meet the leadership challenges of the office. Kolomitz conducted individual, phased interviews as the primary data collection method. Kolomitz interviewed seven participants who had worked in the presidential position for 6–24 months. Five themes emerged from this study:

- Presidents of small private colleges and universities dedicate themselves to the substance of their work and not merely to seeking the prestige of the president’s office.
- College presidents are not the saviors of their institutions.

- College presidents bear significant burdens in carrying out their roles—both institutionally and personally.
- College presidents steer a course towards sustainability amid turbulent times.
- College presidents understand they, alone, cannot render their institutions successful.

Kolomitz (2016) suggested:

The findings highlight the characteristics and strategies of novice presidents at small private institutions and which may advance an understanding of the complexities and the uniqueness of the presidential role in this market share. This study may also provide the foundation for understanding the profiles of small private college presidents in the contemporary higher education landscape, and of the formative and influential experiences upon them. (p. 1)

The goal of this research was to explore the perceived leadership experience of college presidents at private liberal arts colleges throughout the commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

Researchers at ACE's Center for Public Research and Strategy surveyed college presidents regarding their own experiences leading colleges and universities. To provide additional content and clarity to the survey data collected, a group of 15 current and former presidents participated in a roundtable discussion to reflect on the survey data and their experiences. The need for college and university presidents to act as innovative leaders emerged as one theme in the study (Soares et al., 2018). Soares et al. (2018) analyzed the findings and found that innovative leaders work to empower their campuses in the following ways:

1. Developing and maintaining a senior team. Being a university or college president requires a competent team to help run the institution's day-to-day operations and advance the institutional mission. Innovative and entrepreneurial leaders recognize

- the need to develop leaders from within the organization who can fill in at a moment's notice and ensure organizational continuity.
2. **Emphasizing strategic decision-making and cultivating data enables culture.**
Innovative leaders discourage decision-making based on anecdotes. Instead, they promote decision-making based on evidence, which can increase tolerance for strategic risk and small failure. They make and advance less traditional decisions if supported by accurate evidence and compelling stories. Cultivating positive attitudes about data collection and use encourages a campus culture that elevates informed decision-making at all levels.
 3. **Embracing shared governance.** Faculty resistance grabs headlines and has been the source of presidential frustration. Still, leaders looking to make impactful and lasting change on their campuses realize the need to create a culture of buy-in, which involves diverse campus constituents. They accomplish this by leveraging the messaging from their boards, other networks, and campus faculty leaders. Innovative leaders see shared governance as an opportunity rather than a challenge. They believe it is fundamentally positive because those who will be affected by a decision can participate in its making. Shared governance also introduces multiple perspectives into the decision-making process, which ultimately leads to better strategy and outcomes.
 4. **Turning crisis into opportunity.** Innovative presidents realize that crises sometimes represent the best time to make a strategic shift. These moments provide rare opportunities that, if handled properly, can increase the institution's financial security, prosperity, and growth.

5. Communicating and implementing. Innovative leaders ultimately realize that success on any campus depends on effective communication, decision-making, and implementation campus-wide. More leaders now realize they alone cannot move the institution in a certain direction. These presidents recognize the value of creating aspirational goals and assessing whether the goals can be achieved in the institution's current state.
6. Engaging with peers in and out of higher education. These leaders understand that sometimes a problem's best answer can be found at another institution. Sharing insights and resources on innovative programs and pedagogies benefits not only their institution but also the practice of higher education as a whole. And by bringing together business, community, and political leaders, leaders at higher education institutions can discover allies, make demonstrable contributions to their communities, and reestablish the public's trust and faith in higher education (Soares et al., 2018, pp. 6–7).

With innovation at the forefront of their leadership styles, these presidents shared similar experiences in supporting their prospective institutions. Their leadership style has proven effective in enabling college and university presidents to implement positive change to support their campuses.

Effective leadership at higher education institutions has continued to be an important topic of discussion. Birnbaum. (1998) suggested that “administrators must recognize the interactions between the bureaucratic, collegial, political, and symbolic process in colleges and universities if they are to be effective” (Bensimon, 1989, p. 108). Lee Bolman, Terrence Deal, and Robert Birnbaum identified four frames that support a conceptual map for understanding

higher education institutions and effective leadership behavior. These frames consist of the following:

- The bureaucratic frame. Birnbaum (1998) stated this frame is more useful for understanding stable organizations or parts of organizations in which preferences of superiors direct the preferences of subordinates (Bensimon, 1989, p. 109). Hence, presidents who fall under this frame are more likely to emphasize their role in making decisions to support the overall welfare and outcomes of the institution.
- The collegial frame. In this frame, leaders allow decisions to be made by more than one person and involve many campus constituent groups in the decision-making process. Presidents who implement the collegial frame strive to meet the needs of the overall campus community by creating a supportive and collaborative campus community.
- The political frame. Presidents leading through the political frame view the institution as two separate entities. According to J. Victor Baldrige (1971), “this frame assumes that colleges and universities are pluralistic entities made up of groups with different interests and values and that conflict will erupt when resources are scarce” (as cited in Bensimon, 1998, p. 109).
- The symbolic frame. Presidents who operate within the symbolic frame contend with purpose and meaning, creating a shared vision of values and beliefs.

The study conducted by Bensimon (1998) consisted of 32 presidents interviewed from the community and private and public higher education institutions. Based on the results, 13 presidents fell into the single frame category, 11 presidents were identified as implementing two frames, seven presidents were identified as implementing three frames, and one president was

identified as implementing four frames. Nine out of the 13 presidents fell into the bureaucratic and collegial single-orientation frames. Bowman and Deal (1984) suggested that “managers who understand and use only one or two of the frames are like a highly specialized species: They may be well adapted to a very narrow environment but extremely vulnerable to changes in climate or competition” (cited in Bensimon, 1998, p. 121). Similar to Bowles’s (2013) statement on the many roles associated with the college presidency, research conducted over 30 years ago alluded to the future complexities of the college president’s role. In an era of constant change, it would be interesting to know if successful college presidents have noticed they implement multiframe leadership styles when successfully leading their institutions. The results from Bensimon’s (1998) study suggest leadership is a complex process having multiple dimensions, but it did not indicate which leadership style or styles best-suited to lead a college campus.

College presidency challenges

College and university presidents must serve various internal and external constituent groups with diverse interests while ensuring these interests align with the institution’s mission and vision. Presidency leadership roles have become more complex and challenging, tasking presidents to provide skilled, visionary leadership. However, these complexities, in an era of constant change, mean “today’s reality is that initiatives cannot be successful if they are driven solely by an individual chancellor or president. High functioning teams are essential” (Kaufman, 2013, p. 2). Effective leaders must develop leaders around them. College presidents who leave an institution with unresolved issues place a burden on the new president who must come in and implement immediate change. Robken (2007) stated: “The most common determinates of

leadership succession relate to organizational and contextual factors. Several studies found that succession is often prompted by the poor performance of the predecessor” (p. 140). Effective leaders can turn challenging opportunities into positive successes. However, in higher education, leaders must take a collaborative approach involving various campus constituent groups.

College and university presidents have complex and wide-ranging responsibilities. In addition to overseeing the institution’s day-to-day functions, they must allocate time to be visible and create meaningful relationships with the students. Kuh et al. (1991) explained that “because the president serves as a symbolic leader for all members of the campus community, how, where, and to what ends he or she spends time sends strong messages to everyone about what, and who is valued” (p. 360). Attending student events, athletic programs, and academic honor programs sends messages to the students that they are valued members of the campus community. The Council of Independent Colleges (CIC) used survey results from the American College Presidents Study in 2012, which consisted of data from surveying over 1,600 college and university presidents nationwide. From the survey results, the CIC analyzed the demographic characteristics of presidents, their duties and responsibilities, satisfactions and frustrations within their work, use of time, relationships with constituent groups, their career paths and plans, and the presidential search process and conditions of employment. This report by CIC identified that financial management and fundraising represented the most time-consuming tasks for all presidents. Presidents at small and midsized independent colleges and universities identified most of their time as spent on fundraising (72%), managing finances and budget (57%), and managing enrollment (31%), which far exceeded the time allocated to these pursuits for presidents of public and community colleges and universities (cited in Song et al., 2012 p. 10).

Michael, Schwartz, and Balraj (2001), argue that the role of a college president is very challenging and complex. They further suggest “the college or university president most visibly embodies the institutional mission, vision, and culture” and the institution is viewed as “a ‘lengthened shadow’ of a president” (Michael et al. 2001, p. 332). A consistent theme that emerged from the literature on the effectiveness of a college president is the 21st century is the challenge involved with having one person responsible for completing the many tasks associated with this complex role. In contrast, an effective college president understands these roles and is tasked with selecting campus leaders who will support the president in carrying out these tasks. Rhodes (1998) identified three things a president must do to successfully lead an institution:

- Create the climate. Creating the campus climate represents one of the most challenging and subtle of all presidential roles. This task involves generating trust, encouraging initiatives, building partnerships, promoting teamwork, rewarding achievement, and celebrating success. The president must bring a level of innovation and creativity to this task.
- Recruit the team. The successful president also selects the leaders who will carry the institution forward. These must all be championship players. Their incumbents will share the president’s dreams and will be committed to achieving his or her goals.
- Provide the resources needed to achieve the goals. The president also provides the resources to support the life and work of the campus. The president must raise funds and cultivate the legislature to provide the funding needed for important stretch-goals and ambitious new development (Rhodes, 1998, p. 3–4).

However, Gross (2018) believed the college president's role had become too complex for one person and suggested two heads would be better than one. Gross discussed the possibility of creating a co-presidency position:

I see co-presidencies at this moment in time as enabling key educational institutions in American culture to be led with expertise, grace, equanimity, talent, and collaboration. And it is reflective of how many decisions are needed and how many can be shared. (p. 5)

Chapter summary

A college or university president occupies the most important position in the institution, serving as “the link between the internal and external constituencies; the person who voices the values and purposes for which the institution stands. It is the president who must articulate the potential for service of our institutions of higher education” (Michael et al., 2001, p. 332). This chapter defined the college president's complex role and the importance of their performance to support institutional effectiveness. In addition, this chapter included a review of the major categories of leadership theories (i.e., trait theory, power and influence theory, behavior theory, contingency theory, and path-goal theory), which help researchers understand and describe the college or university president's role. Although many approaches to leadership exist, no one approach has been identified as the most effective in leading a college or university. Researchers in this review had not yet reached a consensus on leadership skills, traits, and behaviors related to the variety of situations associated with leading a college or university. The chapter presented

a review of the research on college and university presidents' leadership experiences and the complex challenges they face.

The majority of research available on college presidency leadership addressed experiences at 4-year colleges and universities or 2-year community colleges. Few researchers had focused on leadership at 4-year private liberal arts colleges. At the time of the study, most small private liberal arts colleges reported enrollments of under 2,500 students, and in today's competitive higher education market, these institutions must respond to the increased emphasis on institutional effectiveness. Campus leadership must draw on creativity and innovation to support an era of constant change. Research developed by this study may help fill the gap in research about effective leadership characteristics to support the presidency position at private liberal arts colleges.

Chapter 3

Methodology

This phenomenological study was conducted using a qualitative research methodology to investigate the leadership experiences of college presidents at private liberal arts colleges in the commonwealth of Pennsylvania. I chose this method because I am interested in capturing the lived experiences of how college presidents lead their respective institutions. In this chapter, I discuss the genre of qualitative study, phenomenology, the selection process for identifying participants, data collection processes, the research questions, data analysis, and the study's trustworthiness.

Research design

This study produced a deeper understanding of the leadership experiences of college presidents at private liberal arts institutions throughout the commonwealth of Pennsylvania. The research captured the essence of the lived experiences of private liberal arts college presidents who led their respective institutions in the 21st century. Within the naturalistic paradigm, this study utilized a phenomenological method. The phenomenological method was chosen because it provided the levels of understanding appropriate for identifying the essence of a lived phenomenon.

Qualitative study

A qualitative research approach was proposed for this study. Qualitative researchers attempt to explore and understand the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human program (Creswell, 2014). The college presidency is a demanding position, and no set of literature identified specific leadership attributes that would ensure success in this role. A qualitative approach produced descriptions of college presidents' leadership experiences, behaviors, emotions, institutional functioning, and interactions among campus constituent groups (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Implementing a qualitative study represented the best way to extract information on the lived experiences of how college presidents led their respective institutions.

Phenomenology

This study relied on descriptive phenomenology. Vagle (2014) explained that descriptive phenomenology is an interpretive, open, flexible, and responsive process that allows the researcher to deeply and thoughtfully settle into and sit with the phenomenon under investigation.

Researchers use phenomenology to identify the essence of an experience. According to Creswell (2014), "phenomenological research is a qualitative strategy in which the researcher identifies the essence of human experiences about a phenomenon as described by participants in the study" (p. 245). College presidents must implement effective leadership skills in a variety of contexts to support the overall campus community. The phenomenological approach was adopted to identify the essence of this experience through the consciousness of the experienter (i.e., the participating college presidents).

Phenomenology is a broad philosophical method of inquiry developed by the German philosophers Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger and based on the premise that reality consists of objects and events (i.e., phenomena) as they are perceived or understood in the human consciousness, and not of anything independent of human consciousness (Moustakas, 1994). However, many philosophers before Husserl and Heidegger conducted phenomenological studies with different interpretations of the method (e.g., Goethe; Purkinje; Miller; Hering; and Stumpf). According to Kockelmans (1967), the term “phenomenology was used as early as 1765 in philosophy and occasionally in Kant’s writings, but only with Hegel was a well-defined technical meaning constructed” (p. 24). However, the mathematician, Edmund Husserl, is now known as the father of phenomenology. Husserl is also known as the person who coined the term “essence” to refer to these structures of lived experience. In addition, Husserl developed the concept of epoche. Epoche requires the elimination of supposition, which requires the researcher to put aside their own experience to adopt a fresh perspective.

Interestingly, the phenomenological method is discovery-oriented rather than verification-oriented. Therefore, the researcher does not propose a hypothesis to support the study but uses the collected data to identify the essence of the lived experience and describe the psychological phenomenon. According to Hopkins (2010),

Husserl's pure phenomenology is driven by the goal of making philosophy a rigorous science. By “science” he understood a method of research capable of generating possible true and false propositions based on evidence. By “rigorous” science he understood science that had advanced to the point of being in the possession of a methodology whose basic concepts and criteria for distinguishing true from false propositions were sufficiently demonstrated to permit an ongoing research agenda available to and

embraced by a community of researchers. And by the evidence, he understood the legitimizing source of scientific and philosophical concepts in an experience more original than but related to, their conceptuality. (p. 83)

A phenomenological methodology focuses on bringing deeper meaning to the lived experience from the perspective of the participants. According to Moustakas (1994), “The empirical phenomenological approach involves a return to experience to obtain comprehensive descriptions that provide the basis for a reflective structural analysis that portrays the essence of the experience” (p. 13). Because I focused my research interest on understanding and describing the essence of the leadership experience of private liberal arts college presidents, studying several individuals who served in presidency roles, conducting remote Zoom interviews to collect data, analyzing data for significant statements, and generating meaning units helped me to identify the essence of the presidents’ lived leadership experiences. The phenomenological approach enabled me to successfully collect and analyze data to support this study.

Population sample

A research population includes a group of individuals or objects that share similar characteristics (Creswell, 2014). The target population for this study consisted of private liberal arts college presidents throughout the commonwealth of Pennsylvania. A college president was defined as the chief executive officer for the institution. A college president typically reports to the board of trustees. To determine the appropriate population for this study, the researcher sought nominations from members of the Pennsylvania Black Conference on Higher Education.

In addition, the researcher conducted a Google search of small private liberal arts colleges in Pennsylvania to determine institutions and college presidents who met the criteria for this study.

Maxwell (2005) asserted that the term “sampling” is problematic for qualitative research because it implies the purpose of representing the population sampled (p. 88). Phenomenological studies should involve participants who experienced the research phenomenon. Purposeful sampling was used for this study to support the appropriate sampling used in phenomenological research (Creswell, 2014; Maxwell, 2005; Moustakas, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This involved selecting specific individuals. Purposeful samples are important in phenomenological research because they allow the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of each subject’s lived experience (Patton, 2005). In selecting research participants, this approach ensured the researcher could collect the information needed to answer the research questions. Maxwell (2005) identified four possible goals for purposeful selection:

1. Achieving representativeness or typicality of the settings, individuals, or activities selected. For this study, the researcher selected 10 college presidents at small private liberal arts institutions throughout the commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Each institution reported undergraduate enrollments of 1,000–2,500 students. Each president identified had to have served in their role for at least 1 year.
2. The sample should adequately capture the population’s heterogeneity. For this study, the researcher selected college presidents from a diverse pool of rural and urban campuses throughout the commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Pennsylvania has over 32 private liberal arts colleges with different campus cultures, academic programs, and research focuses. This diversity supported the intended research to explore the leadership experiences through the complex roles of a college president.

3. Deliberately examine cases that are critical for the theories framing the study or that will subsequently be developed. In phenomenological research, the goal is to explore the participants' lived experiences. A critical component of phenomenology is epoche, which requires the elimination of supposition to ensure the researcher puts aside preconceived notions about the outcomes. However, the researcher did examine the literature on leadership and the roles associated with the college presidency to support this study.
4. Purposeful selection can establish comparisons to illuminate reasons for differences between settings or individuals. The differences in campus location or size, participants' leadership experience or career backgrounds, tuition cost, strategic goals, mission, and vision all offered additional insight into the leadership, creativity, and innovation implemented by each college president.

Two sampling approaches were used to identify participants for this study: criterion-based and nominated sampling. Each of the sampling approaches helped to identify college presidents at private liberal arts colleges throughout the commonwealth of Pennsylvania. The criterion for this study included participants who had been in the presidency role for at least 1 year and who worked at institutions with enrollments between 800 and 2,500 students. The researcher identified potential participants based on Internet searches of private liberal arts colleges throughout Pennsylvania that met the enrollment criteria. Once the institutions were identified, the researcher then determined which of their presidents had served for at least 1 year. The researcher intended to interview 10 college presidents. Phenomenological studies require significant time from the researcher, who must identify the methods and procedures needed for preparation and collection of data, conduct interviews, and organize and analyze data into a

unified and coherent portrayal of the experience investigated (Moustakas, 1994). Creswell (1998) suggested phenomenological research should involve interviewing between 5 and 25 participants, and Morse (1994) suggested interviewing at least six participants to receive enough data to validate the results.

Based on previous studies that relied on a phenomenological methodology and the suggestions from qualitative experts such as Creswell (1998) and Moustakas (1994), the researcher determined data collected from at least 10 participants would yield saturation across metathemes to support the research questions. The researcher implemented multiple stages of coding to reach saturation based on the emerging themes. To reach saturation after multiple stages of coding, the researcher followed up with each participant with additional questions to support the focus of this study.

Data collection

Semistructured, remote (zoom) interviews served as the primary data collection method used in this study, allowing the experiences of each participant to emerge. The individual one-on-one Zoom interviews were appropriate because the aim was to explore the lived leadership experience of college presidents at private liberal arts institutions throughout the commonwealth of Pennsylvania. According to Sorrell and Redmond (1995), the purpose of the phenomenological interview is “not to explain, predict or generate theory, but to understand shared meanings by drawing from the respondent a vivid picture of the lived experience, complete with the richness of detail and context that shape the experience” (p. 1,120).

Before the study began, the researcher obtained approval from the institutional review board at Penn State University (Appendix A) to conduct the study in spring 2021. The researcher designed a 13-question phenomenological interview protocol to support the main research question and four subquestions. Zoom interviews lasting between 60 and 90 min were conducted with each of the college presidents. The researcher recorded and transcribed the interviews using Zoom transcription and video/audio recording software, with identifying information removed. Once the interviews had been transcribed, the researcher sent a digital copy to each participant to review for authenticity.

To initiate the study, the researcher contacted 15 presidents via email. The email included an attached letter (Appendix B) providing information about the study and background information about the researcher. In this letter, the researcher also inquired about their willingness to participate in the study. A brief introductory message was included in the body of the email, informing each participant to review the attached document for additional information on the scope of this research. In the body of the email, the researcher stated he would follow up with a phone call within the next week to provide a formal introduction and to further discuss participation. Within the weekly timeframe, the researcher investigated the background of each president and their respective institutions. This approach helped to initiate dialogue outside the scope of the study and to show the presidents the researcher was invested in exploring their leadership experiences and collecting data to support the field of higher education and leadership.

Once the researcher had contacted all potential presidents and confirmed their participation, the date and time were scheduled for the virtual, semistructured interviews. Each participant received an email (Appendix C) thanking them for agreeing to participate and asking

for their signature on an attached informed consent document, which highlighted confidentiality, the agreed date and time for the interview, and permission to record and publish information from the interviews. The interviews were scheduled over a 4 month period and occurred over Zoom. The researcher allocated 10–15 min before the start of the interview to discuss his professional background and provide any additional clarity on the proposed study.

Research questions

Before developing research questions, researchers must immerse themselves in the literature about the topic. Increasing knowledge on the topic helps the researcher develop research questions best suited to support the research focus. Light et al. (1990) explained that formulating research questions is not a simple or straightforward task:

Do not expect to sit down for an hour and produce an elaborate list of specific questions. Although you must take the time to do just that—sitting down and writing your initial list will not be your final list. Expect to iterate. A good set of research questions will evolve, over time, after you have considered and reconsidered your broad research theme. (p. 19)

One central question and four subquestions were used to guide this study.

- How do private liberal arts college presidents perceive and describe their leadership experience?

The following subquestions further defined the study direction:

- SQ1: What are the perceived challenges associated with being a college president at a private liberal arts institution?

- SQ2: What statements describe the professional experiences future private liberal arts college presidents must possess?
- SQ3: What factors do college presidents believe impact their leadership?
- SQ4: What are the leadership skills that college presidents believe are most critical for responding to the challenges of their job?

Table 3-1 displays the alignment between the study's research questions and the leadership experience of college presidents' questions. The interview protocol can be found in Appendix D.

Table 3-1: Research Questions Corresponding With Interview Questions

Research question	Interview questions
RQ1: How do private liberal arts college presidents perceive and describe their leadership styles?	2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 10, 11, 12
RQ2: What are the perceived challenges associated with being a college president at a private liberal arts institution?	1, 2, 3, 4, 11
RQ3: What statements describe the professional experiences future private liberal arts college presidents must possess?	1, 3, 8, 9, 11
RQ4: What factors do college presidents believe impact their leadership?	6, 8, 10, 12
RQ5: What are the leadership skills that college presidents believe are most critical for responding to the challenges of their job?	2, 3, 5, 8, 11, 12

Pilot study

Maxwell (2005) suggested pilot studies serve the same functions as prior research and can be used to test ideas or methods. As Light et al. (1990) indicated, “no design is ever so complicated that it cannot be improved by a prior, small-scale exploratory study” (p.24). Through a pilot study, a researcher can develop a better understanding of the concepts and theories held by participants. Pilot studies allow the researcher to implement a test run by collecting and analyzing data on a small scale to assess the effectiveness of each method. For this study, the investigator implemented a pilot study, interviewing one college president to determine the effectiveness of the investigator’s interview questions.

Data analysis

Data analysis involves reviewing and assigning meaning to the data collected. According to Hatch (2002),

Data analysis is a systematic search for meaning. It is a way to process qualitative data so what has been learned can be communicated to others. Analysis means organizing and interrogating data in ways that allow researchers to see patterns, identify themes, discover relationships, develop explanations, make interpretations, mount critiques, or generate theories. It often involves synthesis, evaluation, interpretation, categorization, hypothesizing, comparison, and pattern finding. (p. 148)

According to Creswell (2013), phenomenological researchers develop descriptions of the essence of participants’ experiences, not explanations or analyses (p. 77). To describe the essence of college presidents’ leadership experiences, the researcher immersed himself in the

descriptive world of the presidents as if the experience were his own. The investigator used Colaizzi's (1978) distinctive 7-step process to rigorously analyze the data. The stages of Colaizzi's 7-step process appear in Table 3-2.

Table 3-2: Steps in Colaizzi's Descriptive Phenomenological Method

Step	Description
1. Familiarization	The researcher familiarizes themselves with the data by reading through all the participant accounts several times.
2. Identifying significant statements	The researcher identifies all statements in the accounts of direct relevance to the phenomenon under investigation.
3. Formulating meanings	The researcher identifies meanings relevant to the phenomenon that arise from a careful consideration of the significant statements. The researcher must reflexively bracket their presuppositions to stick closely to the phenomenon as experienced (though Colaizzi recognized that complete bracketing is never possible).
4. Clustering themes	The researcher clusters the identified meanings into themes common across all accounts. Again, bracketing of presuppositions is crucial, especially to avoid any potential influence of existing theory.
5. Developing an exhaustive description	The researcher writes a full and inclusive description of the phenomenon, incorporating all the themes produced at Step 4.
6. Producing the fundamental structure	The researcher condenses the exhaustive description down to a short, dense statement that captures just those aspects deemed essential to the structure of the phenomenon.
7. Seeking verification of the fundamental structure	The researcher returns the fundamental structure statement to all participants—or a subsample in larger studies—to ask whether it captures their experience. They may go back and modify earlier steps in the analysis, given this feedback.

Note. Steps from “Colaizzi’s descriptive phenomenological method” in R. Morrow, A.

Rodriguez, & N. King, 2015, *The Psychologist*, 28(8), 643–644.

Coding procedures

The researcher used *in vivo* and initial coding techniques to analyze the data collected from the virtual, one-on-one semistructured interviews. Maxwell (2005) identified coding as the main categorizing strategy in qualitative research. He explained this approach is “quite different from coding in quantitative research, which consists of applying a preestablished set of categories to the data according to explicit, unambiguous rules, with the primary goal being to generate frequency counts of the items in each category” (p. 96). *In vivo* and initial coding techniques helped to organize the data and assisted the researcher in assigning tags to words or phrases. The researcher documented all codes in a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet, which included brief descriptions of each code. Creswell (2014) asserted: “Phenomenological research uses the analysis of significant statements, the generation of meaning units, and the development of an essence description” (p. 196). Coding allowed the researcher to identify common themes throughout the data.

In addition, the transcripts were reviewed several times to identify themes and categories. As new codes emerged, the researcher updated the Microsoft Excel spreadsheet and applied new descriptions to each code. Once saturation occurred through the coding process, the researcher conducted the second set of coding utilizing pattern coding. Spiggle (1994) explained: “Through pattern recognition, it constructs a representation of meanings as recurring themes producing an interpretation of interpretations” (p. 499). Through the utilization of pattern coding, the researcher identified the essence of the leadership experiences of the college presidents.

To address the researcher’s bias and to enhance the credibility of this qualitative study, the researcher identified two impartial researchers to assist with independently coding the data.

The independent coders had both graduated from the workforce education doctoral program at Penn State University and were subject experts in qualitative data analysis.

Once coding was complete, the researcher related and clustered the invariant meaning units into themes and placed them into categories and subcategories. Saturation was reached when no new themes emerged from the data coding and analysis processes. According to Strauss and Corbin (1998), “A category is considered *saturated* when no new information seems to emerge during coding, that is, when no new properties, dimensions, conditions, actions/interactions, or consequences are seen in the data” (p. 136). All three coders met via Zoom to discuss themes and concepts identified by each coder. The independent coders agreed on the themes, subthemes, and codes identified by the researcher. However, the independent coders offered additional insight on subthemes to support the study’s focus. After meeting with the individual coders and making minor revisions, the researcher established group consensus of the final themes and categories.

Triangulation

The researcher employed triangulation to validate this study. *Triangulation* refers to using different data sources by examining evidence from the sources and using this information to justify themes that emerged from the data analysis (Creswell, 2014). Although the primary source of data used for this study consisted of participants’ interviews, the researcher also utilized data from multiple data sources such as literature reviews, interview observation notes, and research conducted on each participant and their respective institutions. The researcher also analyzed these additional data sources to identify themes to support this study.

Member checking

In qualitative research, member checking serves as a critical technique for establishing the credibility and accuracy of the data collected. Creswell (2014) defined member checking as the means to “determine the accuracy of the qualitative findings through taking the final report or specific descriptions or themes back to participants and determining whether these participants feel they are accurate” (p. 201). This process allowed participants to review the interpretation of the data and to help the researcher attribute accurate meanings to their lived experiences.

Each participant in this study was referred to as a coresearcher. Once the interviews were transcribed, each coresearcher received the transcription of their interview and reviewed it for accuracy. After the researcher identified themes and the textural–structural description of their experiences, he requested each coresearcher carefully examine the unified description of the meaning behind their leadership experiences and make any necessary corrections. Charles Fraelich (1989) explained:

Each participant was informed not only of the true nature of the study but was encouraged to become a research participant on equal footing with me. An active attempt was made to recognize the participant as a co-researcher. Each participant was encouraged to join with me as a truthful seeker of knowledge and understanding about the phenomenon of presence. (cited in Moustakas, 1994, p. 108)

Summary

This study was an exploration of the leadership experience of college presidents at private liberal arts institutions. Qualitative methods were used in this phenomenological study to collect,

analyze, and interpret the data and to attribute meaning to the lived experiences of each participant. Colaizzi's distinctive 7-step process was used to rigorously analyze the data through the process of formulating meanings, clustering themes, developing an exhaustive description, and producing the fundamental structure provided insight into the lived experience of college presidents and how they perceive and describe their leadership experience. Triangulation and member checking provided additional validity to this study by examining evidence from different sources and ensuring accuracy of the findings by submitting specific descriptions and themes to participants to review.

Furthermore, two independent coders assisted with coding the data, which addressed any bias from the researcher and enhanced the credibility of the qualitative study. The results of this analysis are presented in chapter 4.

Chapter 4

Results

Introduction

Few researchers had examined presidency leadership at 4-year private liberal arts colleges. Most private liberal arts colleges enroll under 2,500 students, and in today's competitive higher education market, these institutions must respond to the increased emphasis on institutional effectiveness. Campus leadership must respond by employing creative and innovative methods to support an era of constant change. Results from this study may help fill the gap in research about effective leadership characteristics to support the presidency position at private liberal arts colleges.

College presidents must make difficult decisions daily, leading to questions about how they effectively lead their institutions and deal with common challenges. Questions also existed about what professional experiences they would suggest for professionals aspiring to become a president at a private liberal arts college. Although previous research by MacTaggart (2017) provided information on specific skills and attributes college or university leaders should possess, this research was designed to explore the perceived leadership experiences of college presidents at private liberal arts colleges throughout the commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Exploring the leadership experience of private liberal arts college presidents could help identify effective leadership skills needed to manage and stimulate the innovations needed to support the growth and development of private liberal arts institutions. The results from this research study

provide information on leadership best practices and skill attainment for aspiring private liberal arts college presidents.

This research captured the essence of the lived experiences of private liberal arts college presidents who led their respective institutions in the 21st century. Within the naturalistic paradigm, a phenomenological method was chosen for this study because it provided a way of exploring the levels of understanding needed to identify the essence of a lived phenomenon. The following primary research question guided this study:

- RQ1: How do private liberal arts college presidents perceive and describe their leadership experience?

The following subquestions further defined the study direction:

- RQ2: What are the perceived challenges associated with being a college president at a private liberal arts institution?
- RQ3: What statements describe the professional experiences future private liberal arts college presidents must possess?
- RQ4: What factors do college presidents believe impact their leadership?
- RQ5: What are the leadership skills that college presidents believe are most critical for responding to the challenges of their job?

Demographics

The target population for this study consisted of private liberal arts college presidents throughout the commonwealth of Pennsylvania. A college president was defined as the chief executive officer for the institution. College presidents typically report to the board of trustees.

To determine the appropriate population for this study, the researcher sought nominations from members of the Pennsylvania Black Conference on Higher Education. In addition, the researcher conducted a Google search of small, private liberal arts colleges in Pennsylvania to identify institutions and college presidents who met the study criteria.

The researcher selected 10 college presidents at private liberal arts institutions throughout the commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Each institution reported undergraduate enrollments of between 1,000 and 2,500 students. Each president identified had served in their role for at least 1 year.

Data collection

Ten participants completed interviews for this study. Each interview was recorded and transcribed, and all interview transcripts were then uploaded to NVivo 12 Pro for organization and analysis. The data were organized according to each participant, and each received a pseudonym. Table 4-1 displays the participant interview details.

Table 4-1: Participants' Interview Details

Participant	# transcript pages (Times New Roman, 12pt font, single-spaced)	Length of interview in min	Length of presidency	Presidency position #
Participant 1	30	80	1 year, 8 months	First
Participant 2	28	72	1 year, 8 months	First
Participant 3	25	64	2.5 years	First
Participant 4	26	68	4 years	First
Participant 5	21	66	1.5 years	First
Participant 6	27	76	8 years	First
Participant 7	23	74	1 year, 3 months	First
Participant 8	21	62	1 year, 4 months	Second
Participant 9	32	94	4 years	Second
Participant 10	19	62	1 year, 9 months	First
Mean	25	72	2 years, 8 months	
Total	252	718		

Data analysis

To describe the essence of the college presidents' leadership experiences, the investigator immersed himself in the descriptive world of the presidents as if the experiences were his own.

The investigator used Colaizzi's (1978) distinctive 7-step process (see Figure 4-1) to rigorously analyze the data.

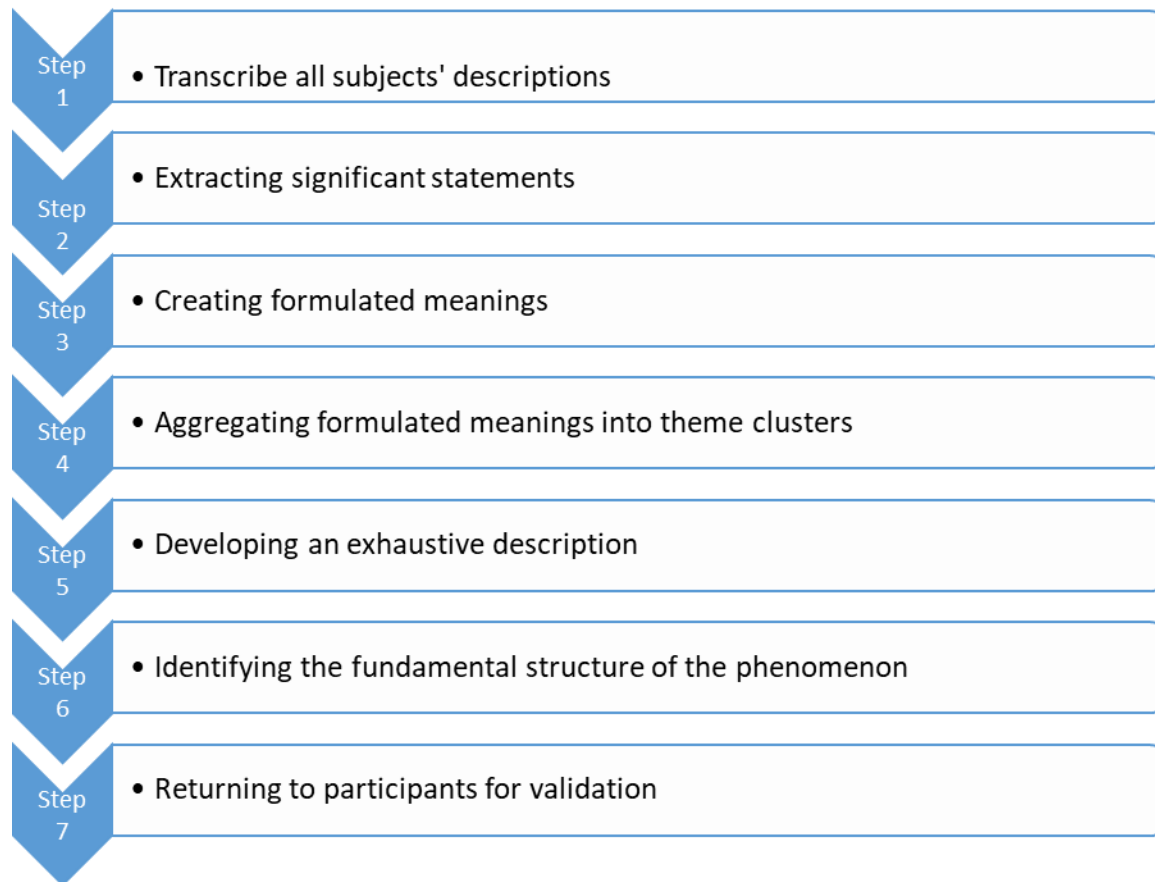


Figure 4-1: Adapted illustration of Colaizzi's (1978) phenomenological data analysis steps.

Coding procedures

To analyze the data collected from one-on-one, semistructured interviews, the researcher utilized in NVivo and initial coding techniques. NVivo and initial coding helped the researcher organize the data and assisted with assigning tags to words or phrases. A word cloud and a tree map were developed during NVivo coding to aid in the analysis and better understand the most

frequently used words in the interviews. Figure 4-2 shows the word cloud. Figure 4-3 displays the tree map.

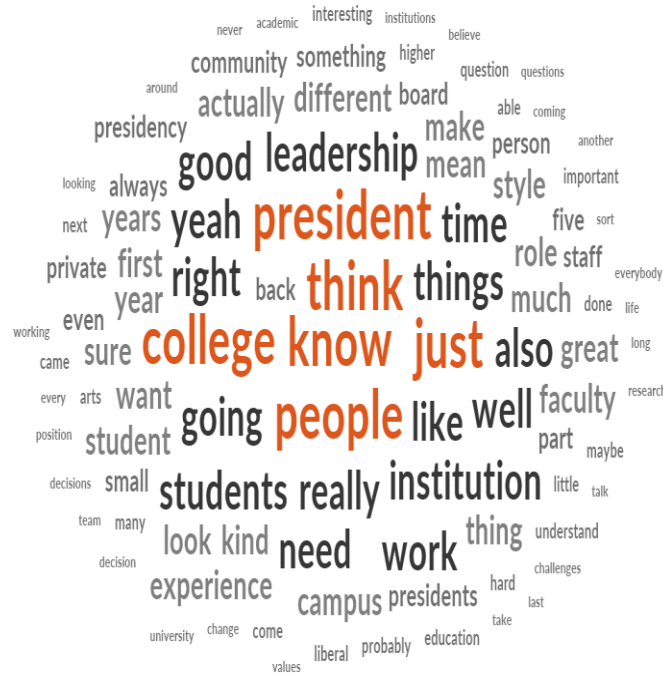


Figure 4-2: Word cloud.

In figures 4-2 and 4-3, these images provide word frequency analysis using a word cloud and tree map format. These figures provide a breakdown on a hierarchical format using a cloud of graphics and nested rectangles. The different size words and rectangles indicate the frequency of words identified throughout each of the president's interview transcripts.

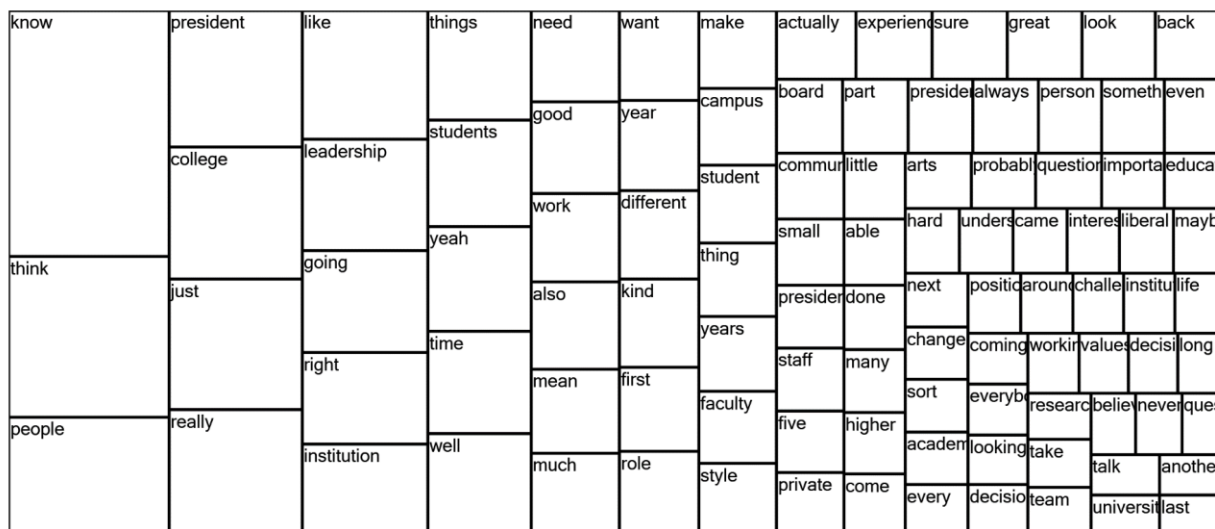


Figure 4-3: Tree map.

The researcher documented all codes in a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet, which included a brief description of each code. Creswell (2014) said: “Phenomenological research uses the analysis of significant statements, the generation of meaning units, and the development of an essence description” (p. 196). Coding allowed the researcher to identify common themes throughout the data.

In addition, the researcher reviewed the transcripts several times to identify themes and categories. As new codes emerged, the researcher updated the Microsoft Excel spreadsheet and applied new descriptions to each code. Once saturation occurred during the coding process, the second set of coding was conducted utilizing pattern coding. Spiggle (1994) explained: “Through pattern recognition, it constructs a representation of meanings as recurring themes producing an interpretation of interpretations” (p. 499). Through the utilization of pattern coding, the researcher drew a conclusion regarding the leadership experiences of the college presidents.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was attained by establishing credibility, transferability, dependability, conformability, and authenticity (Cope, 2014). The researcher conducted member checking on both the interview transcripts and the analysis results while referring to each participant as a coresearcher. Once the interviews were transcribed, each coresearcher received the transcript of their interview to review for accuracy. Once the researcher identified themes and the description of their experiences, they asked each coresearcher to carefully examine the unified description of the meaning behind their leadership experiences and correct any errors.

Credibility

The researcher employed triangulation to support the study's credibility. In addition to the interviews, the researcher also utilized data from multiple data sources such as literature reviews, interview observation notes, and research conducted on each participant and their respective institutions. These additional data sources were also analyzed to identify themes to support this study.

Transferability

The current study retained the original rich and thick responses provided by the interview participants and presented them with a detailed methodology to make replication easier.

Dependability

In a highly dependable study, readers can easily follow and critique the research process. Consequently, the researcher increased dependability by providing detailed documentation of the research design and implementation (Moon et al., 2016). In addition, the researcher conducted self-assessments of bias to increase the transparency of the research process and to reduce bias.

Confirmability

In the current study, the researcher increased confirmability by conducting reflexive journaling to document self-assessments of biases that ensured the results were based on the participants' experiences rather than the researcher's preferences. The researcher also conducted member checks with the participants by asking them to confirm the accuracy of their interview transcripts and to make sure they agreed with how their interview data was interpreted.

Emerging themes

The following primary research question guided this study:

- How do private liberal arts college presidents perceive and describe their leadership experience?

The following subquestions further defined the study direction:

- What are the perceived challenges associated with being a college president at a private liberal arts institution?

- What statements describe the professional experiences future private liberal arts college presidents must possess?
- What factors do college presidents believe impact their leadership?
- What are the leadership skills that college presidents believe are most critical for responding to the challenges of their job?

Five themes arose from this iterative, qualitative analysis: (a) perceived challenges of a college president, (b) critical experiences for college presidents, (c) impactful factors on leadership, (d) critical leadership skills for college presidents, and (e) leadership experience of a college president. Each theme encompassed several subthemes and codes.

The first theme, perceived challenges of a college president, comprised two subthemes: challenges and steps to meet challenges. These subthemes developed from participants' rich and varied responses to the questions about the obstacles and difficulties that college presidents face in their roles. Participants detailed the challenges they experienced related to finances, communication, and culture.

The second theme, critical experiences for college presidents, comprised three subthemes: college experience, leadership experiences, and advice for aspiring college presidents. These subthemes emerged from the diversity of responses to the questions about experiences that contribute to better college president performance. Participants described their experience in a college setting and leadership roles. They also shared advice they would give to aspiring college presidents.

The third theme, impactful factors on leadership, comprised three subthemes: core values, changes in leadership style, and adapting leadership style. This third theme related to participants' descriptions of what values shaped and molded their leadership styles. These

subthemes arose from participants' responses to questions about how their leadership style had changed over time and what events had motivated adaptations to their leadership style.

The fourth theme, critical leadership skills for college presidents, comprised two subthemes: skills and leadership style. These subthemes emerged from the diversity of responses to the questions about leadership styles and leadership skills vital to a college president's success. Participants described previous experiences that had honed their skills for this role. They also identified skills important for a college president to possess.

The fifth and final theme, leadership experience of a college president, included information relating to the overall research question, how do private liberal arts college presidents perceive and describe their leadership experience? This theme developed from participant's responses to questions regarding how they viewed their own leadership experience and highlighted the importance of their previous experience for success in their current president roles.

Subquestion 1

The first subquestion was: What are the perceived challenges associated with being a college president at a private liberal arts institution? One major theme related to this question involved the perceived challenges of a college president, in which participants identified the various challenges they had faced in their role as a college president. This theme comprised two subthemes: challenges and steps to meet challenges. These subthemes represented the challenges and methods used to address these challenges. All subthemes and examples of quotes that motivated these subthemes appear in these sections.

Challenges

Most participants ($n = 9$) described the challenges they faced in their role as college presidents—noted challenges related to finances, communication, culture, and society. Several participants identified different types of financial challenges, such as financial management, tuition reset, and their school's business model. Participant 1 said: "I told you financial management for me and sustainability is probably the key to the key thing at my institution to have a year or so, it was almost like, you know, what is that called? The perfect storm happened. So tuition resets." Similarly, Participant 3 identified challenges

facing the inevitability of the business model for small liberal arts colleges that no longer works. So, the fact that we've just hit a breaking point with tuition, rising tuition, and that model of need-based financial aid requires ever-bigger endowments, and there is only a select few who can truly have the endowment to do that without worrying about balancing the net tuition revenue. So, the business model is a huge challenge.

Participant 6 shared that finances represented the most pressing challenge: "The first is around the financial challenges of small private colleges." In addition, Participant 7 depicted the financial challenges they faced while also commenting on the longitudinal challenge finances posed:

Also, the long-term financial sustainability of the institution, the pandemic have impacted the institution's position. We have doubled enrollment in the last decade, and we're at our second-highest enrollment in history this year, but we took a significant slide backward, and I think about that moving forward, particularly if this coming fall isn't where I want it to be enrollment wise, and right now I'm very nervous about that.

Participant 1 also commented on this long-term financial burden by describing how institutions take on too much debt. This participant stated: “taking on building a \$27 million building at a college that has a budget of \$65 million and now creating more debt.”

In addition to the financial challenges, some participants described the communication and interpersonal interaction challenges they faced. Participant 8 broadly commented that one challenge was, “Anything that impacts the lives of my colleagues who serve in the university.” Similarly, Participant 2 shared: “Communication has been a challenge. My communication is a constant challenge. It was true in my previous position as well. It’s never good enough; it’s never often enough, and it’s just never enough.” Participant 7 further acknowledged communication as a challenge when they stated: “A challenge has been dealing with diversity, equity, inclusion, and antiracism. I have had push-back negative responses about the communications I have sent concerning diversity, equity, and inclusion and students saying it’s not strong enough.”

Participant 3 detailed the importance of the staff, “working with the employee group who most defines the college, which is the faculty, who are in a very privileged situation in terms of job security and are not always attuned to the realities of the financial world.” Staffing challenges also included problems with morale when finances necessitated layoffs. Participant 6 shared:

Another related to that would be morale, the culture piece of a college community. That’s been a challenge here, because as you try to balance the financial piece, sometimes you have to decide whether it’s layoffs, whether it’s not providing raises or increasing the employee share of health care. You’re going to maybe put people on the defensive a little bit in terms of how they fit into the organization

Participant 5 also reported: “As a president, it is a challenge with so many different stakeholders. You have faculty, staff, students, and in no way are all those groups the same.”

Beyond the staff at colleges, other participants mentioned how interactions with the board of trustees posed challenges. Participant 5 noted:

A big challenge is managing the board of trustees. Our board is predominately business individuals. There is a business aspect of colleges and universities, but we're a nonprofit, and we have a mission, and it is a mission that is not transactional; it is a mission that's transformational, and that differs from other products and services.

Similarly, Participant 8 said, "The trustees of the university, the board, and the administration, the president takes care of today, but we have to be sure that the university is here tomorrow for the next generation of students." These challenges demonstrated the wide-ranging responsibilities of a college president and their many areas of influence.

Steps to meet challenges

Six participants shared methods they used to address the challenges they faced in their roles as college presidents. Several participants emphasized the importance of hiring people they trusted who could help address some challenges. Participant 1 explained: "I brought in a new [chief financial officer], a new enrollment management person, and then hired a position called a special assistant to the president. . . . It's really good to have people you can trust." In addition, Participant 10 recounted:

I mean, the range of expertise that is required. And I will say the biggest lesson and takeaway that I have is you just need to pull in as many different experts as you can because one person is not enough, and this goes back to my whole sense of acquiring different perspectives are the way to go.

Another method to address challenges involved being decisive and communicative.

Participant 9 said:

You have to be completely candid and transparent when you meet with all of our employees. But I think the combination of being fully transparent with people and at the same time reassuring them that we will be in good shape.

Participant 5 explained presidents must make “tough decisions and [follow] through with them.”

Similarly, Participant 6 noted: “You've got to make decisive decisions. You've got to be inclusive in decisions. And you just got to understand the revenue and expense picture and look at it almost every day.” Participant 5 suggested: “As a college president, you have to have the ability to make tough decisions and following through with them.” Overall, participants reported on a variety of methods they used to maintain their effectiveness in their roles as college presidents.

Synthesis of perceived challenges of a college president theme

In summary, the perceived challenges of a college president theme was frequently referenced by participants. This theme addressed the overall research question and SQ1 by demonstrating the participants' experiences with challenges associated with being a college president of a private liberal arts institution. This theme comprised several examples of direct challenges and the methods these participants used to address them.

Subquestion 2

The second subquestion was: What statements describe the professional experiences future private liberal arts college presidents must possess? A major theme related to this question involved critical college president experiences, which involved participants' descriptions of the experience they felt were essential for their preparedness to serve as college presidents. This theme comprised three subthemes: leadership experiences, college experiences, and advice for aspiring college presidents. This subtheme, college experiences represented the diverse professional experiences participants felt related to their success as college presidents. The subthemes and examples of quotes that motivated these subthemes are provided in the following section.

College experiences

All participants described the experiences they had working in a college setting and detailed how these experiences related to their current position. Participant 1 commented on the unpredictability of the role: "Being a president is like being on a roller coaster. There is a thrill, and then there's the kind of agony of what's ahead." Participant 2 shared a similar sentiment: "Amazing experience, outstanding, but it's been invigorating and challenging and rewarding all at the same time. I'd say it has been all-consuming, and that is no surprise." Similarly, Participant 6 said:

The experience has been surprising; it's been uneven; it's been challenging, demanding. However, you want to say it; you know, every day is different, but at the end of the day, it's a real blessing to be asked to be in this role and serve a community.

Participant 5 provided a more detailed explanation of some tasks required in the role: “There has been more of the short-term crisis lately. Making many urgent decisions, looking at strategic planning and vision and look at long term sustainability and institutional change of the institution.” Participant 10 also shared how the role was “rewarding and a lot of crisis management” and described skills such as “having the ability implement positive change and be a transformational leader.” These participants identified experiences they had within their roles at a college.

Leadership experiences

Most participants ($n = 9$) described their professional leadership experiences. These comments were largely prompted by the interview question, “What professional leadership experiences do you feel are critical to be an effective liberal arts college president?” Participants reported a variety of experiences that supported them in their role, ranging from a love of education and students to developing leadership skills through more traditional fellowships. Participant 2 stated: “I think it is critical that you love students and you’ve had a lot of experience with students.” In addition, Participant 3 felt that previous leadership experience was key: “You have to have some experience managing personnel; you have to know how to hire well; you need to know how to manage other busy people, and you have to have been responsible for running a team.”

Other participants noted the importance of appreciating academia. Participant 5 mentioned: “I do think having a deep understanding of how the academy works a deep understanding of the work of the faculty and the faculty role. But, most importantly, a deep

understanding of everybody's role as an educator." Similarly, Participant 1 said, "First thing I would say is you better understand what a liberal arts education is and what it means." This participant added: "You have to be a student of higher education. If you do not live it, breathe it, understand it, you're not going to make it as an effective president." Participant 6 also reported:

My bias is that if you don't have some student life experience in your background, I'm not sure you can be a really, truly effective college president, particularly at a small private school. When in fact, you are the mayor, you're asked to have your feet in a lot of different areas.

Participant 2 similarly stated, "You have to have some leadership experience that has been in academics. Understanding an academic institution is critical because of the central role of faculty." Participant 3 noted: "I have found that what I assume to be true about its academic integrity and quality was I was pleasantly surprised that it was even better than I knew, but I was unpleasantly surprised to find that there was a lot of foundational work to do to make the budget on which this place runs viable." Participant 9 also said:

The president needs some academic background. I'm a believer personally, even though I have a background where I began in other sectors, I think it was critically important that I also had a background as a professor and as a director of academic centers at a couple of institutions and had a PhD in my field because I have credibility with the faculty when we work together, they know that I'm an active scholar.

These participants felt that an understanding of academics was critical to succeeding as a college president.

Last, participants also felt that having some traditional experience with formal leadership training was useful in the role. Participant 4 said:

Either having attended, taught, or gone through some leadership positions at an institution with several things in common with where you end up is important just because you can navigate it effectively, and the person at the top shouldn't be the one that has the least understanding with the nature of the institution.

Similarly, participant 10 shared: "I participated in a yearlong leadership fellowship program that was very helpful in preparing me for the presidency role." Participant 9 more explicitly listed required skills and experiences:

So, I think the kind of experiences that makes somebody an inquisitive, good learner that help a person to know how to move across different disciplines in management and know enough to be a good partner with the people leading those areas and to provide oversight and direction and ask good questions without assuming that they know more than the person in the job. I don't know more than my CFO about finances. I'd be crazy if I second guessed too much of what he does, but I know enough to sit down with him and go through the books and have a meaningful discussion that makes me well-informed.

These participants identified several experiences they felt would prepare someone to become a college president.

Advice for aspiring college presidents

Most participants ($n = 9$) shared a piece of advice they had for people aspiring to serve as college presidents. Many participants noted the importance of gaining diverse experience in tasks required in higher education roles to increase credibility. Participant 1 offered several recommendations: "Work on a project that you have never done before; give yourself credibility,

and take time to develop your career.” In addition, Participant 3 suggested acting on opportunities in professional development: “The training programs offered by our professional organizations are becoming increasingly important. I think that it’s important that one participate to get an idea of what to expect.” Similarly, Participant 5 said: “Taking advantage of professional development opportunities. For me, I was an American Council of Education fellow.” Beyond training classes, Participant 8 also identified other professional development, such as mentoring, as essential. This participant stated: “I had several great role models and mentors who assisted me throughout my higher education career. I was blessed to have people who helped me and kind of getting to know the ropes of things.”

In addition to these recommendations, three participants also shared realities of the job that aspiring college presidents should understand. Participant 9 said:

And the other thing is people don't understand there are a lot of people who believe that the college and university presidency is somehow a glamorous job. And, you know, they don't recognize there's not much glamour in this job. They're those high moments that are a lot of fun and excitement where you get to congratulate the football team when they win the game, or you get to attend commencement and shake the hands of students. But day-to-day, it's not all that glamorous. And you spend a lot of time during certain seasons of the year schlepping around and staying in cheap hotel rooms.

Similarly, participant 10 shared:

And my other best advice is because this is so hard, to be a thousand percent sure if this is an institution that you want to live, breathe, promote, no matter what, because they're going to be moments where you say: “Why am I doing this?” And you must be able to say: “I'm doing this because this amazing institution, you know, students deserve a bright

future, the institution deserves more recognition than it can benefit from more fundraising, et cetera, et cetera.”

Participant 6 spoke to the importance of individuals doing great work in their current position by

putting in the hard work and getting the necessary experience to succeed in this role.

Understanding that the job will come to you before you get to it. The presidency finds you because you have done great work in your current roles. Always keep your eye on the prize that is your current job. The presidency ultimately found me because of the success I’ve had in doing other roles and having success in those roles.

These participants expressed a keen awareness of the burdens that come with the role of college president and wanted aspiring college presidents to note this burden before committing to the job.

Synthesis of critical experiences for college presidents theme

Participants frequently referenced the theme of critical experiences for college presidents. This theme addressed the overarching research question and SQ2 by detailing the professional experiences critical for future private liberal arts college presidents to possess. This theme comprised multiple examples of the professional and college experiences needed and suggestions for aspiring college presidents.

Subquestion 3

The third subquestion was: What factors do college presidents believe impact their leadership? The theme of impactful factors on leadership included information about the core values participants believed to influence a president's role and the changes made to leadership styles while in this position. The subthemes related to this theme included core values, changes in leadership style, and adapting leadership style. These represented the heart of a college president and what drives individuals in this position. These subthemes also demonstrated how college presidents must change to remain effective in their roles. All subthemes and examples of quotes that motivated these subthemes are provided in the following sections.

Core values

All participants shared their core values during their interviews. These core values were reported to shape how each participant led in their role as a college president. Several participants noted the importance of honesty and authenticity for a presidential role. Participant 9 shared:

You cannot be a good leader today without the willingness to be honest and transparent with people; you just have to be willing to tell people the truth, even when the truth doesn't make them happy, but you have to be willing to do that.

Similarly, Participant 4 stated, "honesty, integrity, openness, gratitude, faith, collaboration, being humble. As a president, my value is prioritizing the institution." In addition, Participant 6 said, "authenticity [students first], respect, transparency, character, and integrity."

In addition to authenticity and honesty, several participants described the importance of integrity for a college president. Participant 4 shared, “integrity, honesty, commitment to the welfare of student, faculty, and staff.” Participant 7 also mentioned “integrity, transparent communication, pride, inclusivity, and congruence, explaining that “with congruence, you must be able to walk the walk if you’re going to talk the talk.” Similarly, Participant 5 said, “honesty, integrity, openness, gratitude, faith, collaboration, being humble. As a president, my value is prioritizing the institution.”

Another frequently reported core value that participants believed was essential for a college president was valuing community. Several participants commented on their efforts to align their values with those of the community. Participant 6 noted: “And so you’ve got to work at aligning your values to your community because that fit, if you will, is absolutely essential for you to be successful.” Similarly, Participant 2 commented: “I have one more value to add to get to that 100% and its community. Yeah, absolutely. What matters to me is bringing people together.” Participant 9 mentioned:

Too many people have gone to business school, and they have never had that literally taught out of them. You don't value people. You value numbers. And every number represents a life and a person. And as a president of a college, I think keep that in mind. I also value the mission of the college. And I think for us and for, frankly, any undergraduate college, that mission has to be providing more than a ticket to a trade. We are not a trade school. Our primary purpose is not to be a place where people come and go through a collection of courses to get a job. Our job is to help 18- to 22-year old's grow up and become mature adults ready to live meaningful lives and who are, as we say, people of uncommon integrity.

This participant added:

It's important as the president, your personal values are aligned with the values of the institution, and I think that it's the responsibility of the presidential candidate and the search committee to look for that alignment because misalignment leads to failure.

Similarly, Participant 10 said:

The institution prides itself on its statement of community and therefore of inclusivity, and to me, that reflects both the sense of kind of honesty and collaboration, accessibility, right, that we're all members of this community. I am not the president. I am just part of the community.

The lists of core values that participants shared showed the motivations participants believed should drive a college president in their role within a liberal arts college.

Last, several participants emphasized the importance of being resilient. Participant 1 shared:

Resiliency I have, and I've needed resiliency through my life and my career dedication. I mean, you really have to love what you do in higher education and be dedicated, mission-based. So that's who I am, and I'm very mission-based and mission-focused.

Similarly, participant 10 shared that "persistence and nimbleness" were critical values to possess as a college president. Participant 3 suggested: "You cannot do this job without a great deal of resilience and fortitude." Most notably, leading an institution through a global pandemic has been challenging. Participant 1 stated: "Managing COVID was the greatest amount of adaptability and resiliency I ever had to do in my life, and everybody else is doing it right now; that's the other thing that comes in your job description."

Changes in leadership style

All participants described how their leadership style had changed while in their role. Some commented that their communication skills had increased, and their leadership style reflected that change. Participant 7 shared:

Yes, I am a doer. I like to get things done, and as a president, you spend more of your time as a thinker, a strategist, and a communicator, and so this has really proven challenging for me because I like for things to happen fast, so often I want to do things myself rather than waiting for someone else to do it.

Similarly, Participant 2 stated: “Yes, I would say I have become much more communicative. I have realized that performance is part of what the president needs to do and that I’m being performative all the time.” Participant 5 also reported: “I think that one major thing that has changed is my understanding of how my words and my presence affects individuals.”

In addition, other participants shared how their sense of urgency and decisiveness had changed. Participant 1 shared: “As a result, I have a greater sense of urgency at this institution. So, you know, I’ve had to kind of rethink the amount of time in the shared governance process as I once did.” Participant 6 also commented: “I think the one thing that has changed for me is decisiveness, an urgency that I don’t know my leadership style changed, but I realized in my position here that people expect action, they expect decisiveness.”

In contrast, two participants did not feel that their leadership style had changed while serving as a college president. Participant 8 reported:

I don’t know if my leadership style had changed because I have had a long career before my presidency. However, as I became president, it was clear that I did not want to

undervalue political savageness. You know, there is an important role, whether its campus politics, whether its community politics, whether it's the broader geographic politics because when you're president, depending on where your campus is, if you're going to build a building, you're dealing with the township officials, you're dealing with the board of supervisors, the zoning board.

Participant 9 similarly shared: "I don't think so because I came into the presidency later in life, in my 50's and having already had the experiences that sort of honed my leadership, I don't think it's changed remarkably."

Adapting leadership style

Most participants ($n = 7$) denoted how they adapted their leadership style based on events or experiences in their roles as college presidents. Several participants shared how the COVID-19 pandemic affected their leadership styles. Participant 5 shared:

Because of COVID-19, like many institutions, we had to pivot to remote instruction within days. A quick decision has to be made, and I don't know if I would say I adapted my leadership style; it was more making a decision in the midst of a crisis. It was a sense of urgency. I guess that's the part where I adapted and realized, OK, take a deep breath. Similarly, Participant 1 noted that managing COVID was the greatest amount of adaptability and resiliency I ever had to do in my life, and everybody else is doing it right now; that's the other that comes in your job description." This participant also shared: "Because of COVID-19, I shut down the school, and all we could do was think about safety, health, changing the whole academic system on a dime. So,

now all of a sudden, these great dreams that I had turned into crisis response. So, because of this, I had to be adaptable.

Participant 9 suggested:

It has adapted to different contexts. I have held many leadership roles in different areas of higher education. You can be a catalyst for something new, and it might not be exactly what you had in mind, but the work of that kind of leadership is really planting seeds that other people need to continue to nurture. And I've done that for a long time, and I do it here. I think people see me as a person that generates new ideas, sometimes at a pace that they wish would slow down, but you know, I enjoy it.

In addition, two participants commented that their leadership styles had become more collaborative to adapt to their work environments. Participant 2 said: "This institution is based on the Quaker tradition; we govern by consensus." In addition, Participant 3 described the process by which they solved a problem:

What we do is sit down and talk through a problem and find a collaborative solution. We don't demand things from each other because that is not the value we teach in this kind of analytical training. But I had to adapt my response because we needed to get through the immediate crisis first before we could have that conversation.

Similarly, Participant 9 stated:

So you know, I think at a small college, you have to be tuned in very closely to relationships and understanding who the people are, knowing them, knowing something about their family, it's more of a family atmosphere. So I wouldn't say that's a change, but it may be an adaptation from what was required at larger places.

These participants knew their leadership styles were not stagnant and shared specific examples in which they had to adapt as college presidents.

Synthesis of impactful factors on leadership theme

In summary, the participants made many references to the theme of impactful factors on leadership and several contributed opinions. This theme addressed the overarching research question and SQ3 by showing the factors that college presidents believed affected their leadership. These examples provided evidence for the values that should be emphasized in this role. The subthemes also demonstrated the college president's ever-evolving role.

Subquestion 4

The fourth subquestion was: What are the leadership skills that college presidents believe are most critical for responding to the challenges of the job? The theme of critical leadership skills for college presidents emerged from information about the skills needed to succeed in a leadership role such as a college president. This theme included subthemes related to the skills needed and the effective leadership styles. These subthemes highlighted the qualities that participants promoted as essential for success. Both subthemes and examples of quotes that motivated these subthemes are provided in the following sections.

Skills

All participants described the leadership skills they felt were most critical for responding to challenges they experienced as a college president. Several participants remarked that communicating with and motivating staff were critical skills. Participant 2 explained: “You also need to be able to delegate and inspire other people to take those ideas and successfully implement them.” Participant 7 summarized the skills necessary for this role:

I constantly refer to the five Cs of leadership: care—compassion, empathy and willingness to do what others have to do; communication; credibility—and that’s character and integrity piece; community—relationships; and camaraderie — collaboration. And to add another non-C: nimbleness. I had plans right when I came in, and those plans have gone out the door, and we’ve changed pretty significantly, and so I think we had to respond in ways that I would probably never anticipated.

Similarly, Participant 1 reported: “I’ve always kind of had this cascading communications philosophy where you have got to give people as much as you can as soon as you can. You have to know the right amount of information to communicate.”

In addition to effective communication skills, participants also commented on the importance of flexibility and good humor in the job. Participant 5 shared: “Flexibility, I think you need to value multiple perspectives, multiple ways of thinking.” Participant 3 mentioned having “a willingness to consider all opinions.” Similarly, Participant 6 noted:

A sense of humor. You will not please everybody every day, and you know, if you’re in this for a popularity contest, I don’t care what leadership role you’re in. You’re chasing leadership for all the wrong reasons. You’ve got to it because you want to make the organization stronger. You want to serve students in a better way, and the sense of humor

relates to not taking yourself too seriously, not taking others too seriously, because I don't care what size organization, you will always have a cadre of individuals that are going to want to see you fail.

Participant 6 continued: "So those two things, I think in terms of leadership skills and responding to today's challenging environment, you got to have a sense of humor. Don't take yourself too seriously. The other one is, you know, spend time on hiring the right people for your organization." In addition, Participant 2 defined experience as a skill: "I'm 60 years old, and I think that's a real advantage. I think time on Earth matters as one becomes wiser and has a lot of life experiences. So I am grateful for that."

Another skill frequently described by participants was decisiveness and having the courage to make tough decisions. Participant 8 responded: "Don't be afraid to fail, act, develop a plan and have a set of metrics associated with the plan, so you can see that you're making progress or not." Similarly, Participant 3 commented on having "the ability to make hard decisions and the ability to implement them." Participant 2 shared a similar idea and emphasized the importance of delegating: "You also need to be able to delegate and inspire other people to take those ideas and successfully implement them." All participants shared important skills they felt were necessary for this role.

Leadership style

The participants provided different statements describing their leadership styles. One of the more salient themes identified during this study involved college presidents' efforts to serve their campus community and the surrounding community. All participants provided descriptions

that included several characteristics of servant leadership defined by Spears (2010) (i.e., listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community). Participant 5 stated:

So my leadership philosophy is very much grounded in a servant leadership model. It's not about me; it's about my college, my institution, my faculty, staff and students, and making sure that the decisions I make allow them to be successful, allow them to implement and to support the mission of the institution. So, it's really about serving my institution and all the stakeholders of the institution.

Similarly, Participant 9 discussed how their leadership style best supported the institution's interest and the people they served: "I implement a servant leadership style. It's very much in thinking about the institution first, the people first, and making decisions that basically are in the best interest of the institution and the people." Participant 1 responded on a similar theme:

My overarching leadership style is focused on how do I take this organization and move it up, sustain it, be that inspiration, be that leader on campus who knows the way, who listens to people and make sure that I'm bringing them along.

Participant 4 added: "I believe it's important for individuals in leadership positions to be humble, to provide a model of both apologizing, but also forgiving, and I see that as part of the servant leadership."

Spears (2010) included a commitment to the growth of those served as one characteristic of servant leadership. Participant 6 described this kind of commitment: "I think my job is really to allow the institution and everybody who works for it to realize their highest potential."

Similarly, Participant 2 stated: "My leadership experience is being able to bring people together

and elevate and enhance the collective talents of many people toward a common purpose.”

Participant 3 discussed the importance of listening to make informed decisions to support the institution by “having the ability to lead while listening to all points of view and then gathering all that information and making the best possible decision, taking all the points of view into consideration.” Participant 7 shared:

I constantly refer to the five C’s of leadership, care; communication; credibility; community; and camaraderie. I had plans right when I came in, and those plans have gone out the door, and we’ve changed pretty significantly, and so I think we had to respond in ways that I would probably never anticipated.

Participants noted their own beliefs about their leadership style and what leadership meant to them. Several participants identified their leadership styles as collaborative. Participant 3 described their style as “nonhierarchical collaborative, active listening. I invite diverse points of view. I invite objection because I think we make our best decisions when we’ve heard all perspectives on a matter.” Participant 2 said:

I think there are really big gender issues in the way that I’m going to answer this question because women as leaders, as presidents, are still relatively underrepresented, as are other intersectional identities. So, I would say my leadership style is collaborative and direct.

Participant 4 also pointed to consensus, saying, “I believe we are smarter collectively than we are individually.” Participant 6 noted:

I have always leaned more towards the human resource leadership style, acknowledging that your people are what makes you tick as an organization. For me, it’s always been having candor because you can’t get better as a person or as an organization unless you own up to some hard facts. For me that’s a really important characteristic of strong

leaders, is to have candor with others and with yourself for you to truly be effective and continue to grow as an individual.

Synthesis of critical leadership skills for college presidents theme

In summary, the critical leadership skills for college presidents theme involved many references, and most participants contributed opinions to this theme, with several describing the characteristics of a servant leader. This theme addressed the overarching research question and SQ4 by showing the leadership skills college presidents believe they most need to respond effectively to the job's challenges. These experiences also demonstrated leadership styles that participants used to succeed in their roles.

Overarching Research Question

The overarching research question was: How do private liberal arts college presidents perceive and describe their leadership experience? The final theme, leadership experience of a college president, emerged from participants' direct responses to questions about how they perceived their leadership role and how they would describe their role. This theme directly addressed the overarching research question for this study. Two subthemes developed from this theme: leadership role and past experiences. All participants described their roles during these interviews.

Many participants commented on their perception of the role of a college president. Participant 2 noted that college presidents should carve out time to review themselves as a leader:

“My overarching purpose as a president is to reflect my definition of leadership and create synergies among all the incredibly talented people at the institution and within the communities so that we can provide an outstanding liberal arts education.” Participant 6 mentioned the importance of demonstrating a clear vision to understand where the institution is and where it intends to go:

So, for me, leadership is really demonstrating vision, demonstrating a path forward, demonstrating clear priorities, demonstrating competence. So, I think your community wants to know that you are on top of things, that you understand the pace of change, that you understand that you’ve not got to deal with just what’s in front of you, but what’s around the bend.

Similarly, participant 7 described the institution’s sustainability as a key priority:

You can’t forget that you’re not stewarding the institution or the organization for the moment. You are stewarding the institution for the long haul, and so the sustainability of the institution for me is front and center. The long-term health and sustainability of the institution are what you need to have centered, then some of these other things become much easier.

Participant 10 further described their leadership role as a college president:

I believe my purpose is to keep the institution focused on the future and in trying to evolve, to become the institution that will thrive for the next 200 years. And to continue, well, everyone has their area they have to keep their eyes on and stay on top of. I consider my role to keep the core values of the institution going while also trying to keep those present while trying to adapt the institution for the future.

Similarly, Participant 4 indicated: “The president’s role is to carry the saga of the institution forward, and that’s a combination of real stories and the legend of the institution.” These participants described what they believed to be their leadership role within the complex organization of a private liberal arts college or university campus.

Several participants described how their experiences in other positions influenced their role as college president. Participant 6 shared: “I personally think now that I’ve done this job for nearly 8 years, that my student life experiences. More than others. Probably including the interim presidency that I had better prepared me for this role.” Similarly, Participant 5 reported valuing “having a deep understanding of how the academy works, a deep understanding of the work of the faculty and the faculty role.” Participant 4 also noted:

Either having attended, taught at, or gone through some leadership positions at an institution that has several things in common with where you end up is important.

Participant 2 stated: “You also have to have some leadership experience that has been in an academic setting.” These participants knew their past experiences heavily informed their role as college presidents. Participant 7 had prior experience working directly with a college president and asserted:

I came from being a chief of staff to a president at one point. I think that is absolutely the best preparation to be a college president. No other position on a college campus gets to see the daily work of a president. They don’t understand the commitment. They don’t understand the different people are pulling the president in multiple directions. They don’t understand what it means to live in the fishbowl, whether that be that you actually have an institutional house, as I do, that sits right on campus, and I can look out my

bedroom window and see a residence hall or where someone was literally walking on the sidewalk.

Conclusion

In this chapter, the researcher explored the findings from qualitative interviews conducted with 10 presidents of liberal arts colleges. Data were analyzed using Colaizzi's (1978) distinctive 7-step process to provide a rigorous analysis. This process revealed the following themes regarding the leadership experiences of college presidents at private liberal arts institutions throughout the commonwealth of Pennsylvania: (a) perceived challenges of a college president, (b) critical experiences for college presidents, (c) impactful factors on leadership, (d) critical leadership skills for college presidents, and (e) leadership experience of a college president. Each theme encompassed several subthemes and codes.

The first research subquestion (i.e., RQ2: What are the perceived challenges associated with being a college president at a private liberal arts institution?) was addressed by the theme: perceived challenges of a college president. This theme comprised two subthemes: challenges and steps to meet challenges. Participants shared the obstacles they encountered in their roles as college presidents, including those related to finances, communication, culture, and society. They also detailed the methods they used to address and overcome these challenges.

The second research subquestion (i.e., RQ3: What statements describe the professional experiences future private liberal arts college presidents must possess?) comprised three subthemes: leadership experiences, college experiences, and advice for aspiring college presidents. Participants described the experiences they had in college positions and leadership

positions they believed supported success in a college president role. They also recommended actions aspiring presidents should take to increase their chances of obtaining and succeeding in each role.

The third research subquestion (RQ4: What factors do college presidents believe impact their leadership?) was addressed by one theme: impactful factors on leadership. This third theme was comprised of three subthemes: core values, changes in leadership style, and adapting leadership style. These subthemes arose from participants' responses to questions regarding their five core values and how their leadership style had changed over time. Many participants noted that integrity, communication, honesty, and alignment with the community represented core values that should motivate a college president. These participants also shared that their leadership styles had changed over time as they gained skills. Last, several participants provided specific examples of how they had adapted their leadership style to meet changing circumstances.

The fourth research subquestion (i.e., RQ5: What are the leadership skills that college presidents believe are most critical for responding to the challenges of the job?) was addressed by one theme: critical leadership skills for college presidents. This theme comprised two subthemes: skills and leadership style. Participants described what leadership skills a college president should possess. Many participants identified effective communication and the ability to motivate colleagues as critical skills. Participants also described their leadership styles.

The fifth and final theme, leadership experience of a college president, included information relating to the overall research question (i.e., RQ1: How do private liberal arts college presidents perceive and describe their leadership experience?). Participants contributed information about their view of the college president role and emphasized the need for effective

leadership that would support the institution for years to come. Participants also highlighted their previous experience as central to their success in their president roles.

Direct quotes from participants supported all themes and subthemes identified in this chapter. In Chapter 5, the researcher presents additional insights, findings, and recommendations for future research.

Chapter 5

Conclusions, Recommendations, and Limitations

We lead from the essence of who we are as a person.

—Lillas Brown, University of Saskatchewan

Introduction

This study was an exploration of the reported leadership experiences of novice presidents at private liberal arts institutions in the commonwealth of Pennsylvania. The aim was to create a better understanding of the complexities and uniqueness of the 21st-century presidential role. This study also provides a foundation for professional leadership experiences critical to support aspiring and current college presidents. One overarching research question and four subquestions guided the study. The following primary research question guided this study:

- How do private liberal arts college presidents perceive and describe their leadership experience?

The following subquestions further defined the study direction:

- SQ1: What are the perceived challenges associated with being a college president at a private liberal arts institution?
- SQ2: What statements describe the professional experiences future private liberal arts college presidents must possess?
- SQ3: What factors do college presidents believe impact their leadership?

- SQ4: What are the leadership skills that college presidents believe are most critical for responding to the challenges of their job?

This study began with the researcher's desire to know more about the lived leadership experiences of college presidents. Existing research suggested that contemporary American college or university presidents face more challenges than at any time in the modern era (MacTaggart, 2017, p. 21). I employed a descriptive phenomenological method to explore the lived leadership experiences of college presidents at private liberal arts institutions in the commonwealth of Pennsylvania. An important part of the phenomenological process involves setting aside biases and preconceived assumptions about human experiences, feelings, and responses to a particular situation. I took this very seriously because, at the time of the study, I served as a vice president of student affairs and worked closely with the campus president.

The theoretical framework for this study was descriptive phenomenology, which is used to explore how human beings describe a certain phenomenon. During the analysis, I identified themes related to how a particular phenomenon was perceived or experienced.

This chapter provides a concluding discussion of the reported themes by connecting the themes that emerged from participants' leadership experiences to the literature review in Chapter 2. The identified themes follow previous research on college presidents' leadership experiences and support the leadership experiences described by participants. Recommendations for future study and limitations are presented.

Interpretations of findings

Chapter 4 provided rigorous interview data analysis using Colaizzi's (1978) distinctive 7-step process. The presented conclusions align with the phenomenological data in Chapter 4 and are contextualized to the following themes regarding college presidents' leadership experiences at private liberal arts institutions in the commonwealth of Pennsylvania: (a) perceived challenges of a college president, (b) critical experiences for college presidents, (c) impactful factors on leadership, (d) critical leadership skills for college presidents, and (e) leadership experience of a college president. Each theme encompassed several subthemes and codes. Figure 5-1 illustrates themes and subthemes.

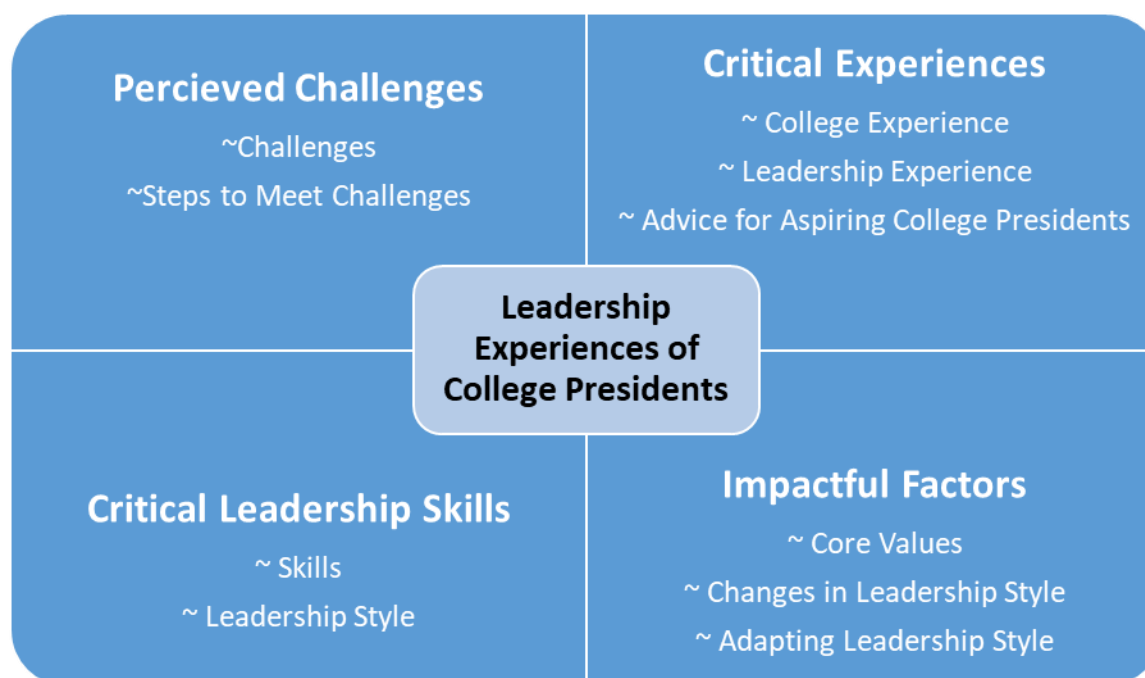


Figure 5-1: College president leadership experiences.

This study revealed that the essence of leadership is influence, and the essence of influence is understanding. Given the difficulties of leading an institution of higher learning, participants discussed their ability to influence members of the campus community to support the institution's mission and vision through shared governance, relationship building, trust,

transparency, collaboration, and a willingness to listen to all points of views. A president must lead, persuade, and consult with numerous internal and external constituencies. Most notably, the results highlighted the college presidency's complexity and showed that presidents must make many decisions each day in a context where every decision will meet with resistance from at least some members of the campus community. However, based on the interview responses, the primary responsibility of the college president is not to drive consensus but to understand why others might disagree while remaining sensitive to others' feelings and perceptions. Participant 4 emphasized the need to be "sure that people understand the challenges we face and then understand what we need to do to overcome them, understand what the current institutional priorities are and understand why." Similarly, Participant 1 explained the need to

[make] sure I set the roles and responsibilities of boundaries at times, knowing what decisions you're going to make and telling people why you made it. So, I tell people this decision is mine in the time of a crisis. I will give it back to you when we're out of the crisis, but explaining why I do that and making the decision.

Participant 1 summarized this point well when they stated:

You have to be inspiring. You have to make sure that people understand why you're doing it—even if they don't agree with what you're doing at all times, and then I had to bring in the right partners to be able to do that. Teamwork! I have a great team behind me, so don't think I did it by myself.

According to Rhodes (1998), presidents must do three things to successfully lead an institution: (a) create the climate, (b) recruit the team, and (c) provide resources to achieve the goals. The participants interviewed for this study described these three things in several ways as part of their leadership experience. To create a positive campus climate, Participant 5 indicated:

“I very much look at the value and contributions of others to help in our decision-making, and then I work very hard to be open and transparent and to be honest and trustworthy.” Participant 7 stated:

In creating a positive campus climate, I think you need to value multiple perspectives, multiple ways of thinking. Having the ability to be creative, we need to be innovative, and I very much look to multiple perspectives from faculty, staff, alums, board of trustees to provide those innovative, creative ideas.

One of the most critical components to hiring the right campus personnel is to hire individuals whose skills, passion, and expertise align with the institution's mission. Participant 1 provided a great example when reflecting on their experience hiring new personnel and positioning current personnel in areas that best fit their expertise:

I looked at the person who was leading the financial piece and found out that the person was credentialed as an engineer and not as a [chief financial officer]. I put this person into another position and held a job search for a [chief financial officer] before starting my presidency on Day 1. I brought in a new [chief financial officer], a new enrollment management person, and then hired a position called a special assistant to the president. It's really good to have people you can trust.

Participant 8 added to this point: “Another skill that I have is that I hire people that are smarter than me. And I find that if I hire the right people, we have a great team, and we can do so much more.”

Lastly, Rhodes (1998) suggested the president should also provide the resources to support the life and work of the campus (p. 4). Participant 7 supported this point:

As a president, I'm really thinking about resources, all the time. I look at resources from different perspectives. It's resources from recruiting students, marketing to students, its resources from a philanthropy standpoint, and the work that I have to do there, its resources in managing the resources that we have.

Presidents must deploy the appropriate resources to ensure members of the campus community have what they need to effectively do their jobs and support the institution's mission and vision. Participant 3 furthered this notion:

In making decisions, we need to make sure that we know that we can actually implement them and make it happen. And that is hard because that means changing culture. It means deploying resources differently. It means all kinds of things that require where the rubber meets the road. And that is where the friction comes from, even more than from making the decision in the first place.

Findings from this study showed the leadership roles of college presidents at private liberal arts institutions in the commonwealth of Pennsylvania were very demanding and complex. The current higher education landscape presents many challenges for college presidents. Although there is no North Star for these presidents to identify some kind of centering that allows them to keep focused on what they need to be doing for the institution for decades to come, they rely on their skills and priorities to move the institution forward. Another finding indicated that all presidents have a different standard for what leadership represents and that the standard evolves based on experience and time.

Conclusions supporting Subquestion 1

The first subquestion was: What are the perceived challenges associated with being a college president at a private liberal arts institution? Two major themes emerged from the data: challenges and the steps to meet challenges. All participants described the challenges they faced in their role as a college president and offered insight on steps to meet these challenges.

Challenges

The role of a college president in the 21st century is very complex. The 21st century environmental and industry pressures intersect creating additional challenges in leading an institution, especially in the age of flux characterized by rapid technology breakthroughs, the Internet, changing student demographics, decreased enrollments, increased need for financial aid, fundraising challenges, evolving research, and changing pedagogies (Friedman & Shraibman, 2017). The participants in this study discussed challenges they faced during their presidency related to finances, communication, culture, and society. Author and higher education scholar Jeff Selingo suggested that today's college president must be a multidimensional leader capable of navigating a single college or entire system through challenges that range from implementing new technology to addressing sexual misconduct and keeping up with changes in learning (cited in Busta, 2018). Most notably, the majority of the presidents discussed different types of financial challenges, such as financial management, tuition reset, and the business model. Further, the majority of participants pointed to anxieties about ensuring their institution's long-term financial viability.

Steps to meet challenges

However, this study revealed that although the complex role of a college president required these men and women to develop and implement a shared mission and vision across all campus constituent groups, one person cannot effectively accomplish this task. College presidents must be able to delegate work to senior leadership staff and be competent in their ability to develop leaders around them. Participant 3 articulated this point well:

The success or failure lies in how collaborative the various cost centers and functional units across the institution are, how well they work with each other. How willingly people seek each other out, their peers out for advice, and partnership in various shared initiatives. Also, a president must figure out how much they can responsibly delegate to some of the senior officers. So, those job efficiencies have shifted. And it is a question of what belongs solely to the president and what used to be a president's job can actually be placed reliably and responsibly with some of the other senior officers.

Similarly, Participant 9 explained:

To support the complexities associated with the role of a college president, the president must be effective in creating more leaders, and it's enrolling many people in meaningful ways in the work that needs to be done. The role of a leader is to facilitate the work of the institution by equipping, inspiring, developing people who can become better leaders and help shoulder the responsibilities in each area of the college for us to move forward collectively. We have to do it collaboratively.

The statements provided by participants and data supporting the decreased tenure of college presidents over the last decade validate the level of demand put on a college president daily. Participant 3 stated: "It's important to stress that this is an almost impossible job by now.

And maybe we need to redefine what a presidency is or, for example, a co-presidency where the job gets split.” To further support this statement, Gross (2018) asserted the role of a college president is too complex for one person, so two heads are better than one. Gross believed no one person could possess all the skills needed to be a college or university president and discussed the possibility of creating a co-presidency position. Gross recommended

co-presidencies at this moment in time as enabling key educational institutions in American culture to be led with expertise, grace, equanimity, talent, and collaboration. And it is reflective of how many decisions are needed and how many can be shared (p. 5).

Findings from the present study revealed the many complexities and challenges associated with the college presidency role. However, presidents at these institutions have done a phenomenal job identifying creative and innovative ways to address these challenges and ensure the long-term health and financial sustainability of their respective institutions.

Conclusions supporting Subquestion 2

The second subquestion was: What statements describe the professional experiences future private liberal arts college presidents must possess? Three major themes emerged from the data: (a) college experience, (b) leadership experiences, and (c) advice for aspiring college presidents. Participants described their experiences in a college setting and in leadership and offered advice for those aspiring to assume the role of a college president.

College experience

All participants described their experiences working in a college setting and detailed how these experiences related to their current position. College and university presidents have complex and wide-ranging responsibilities and, in addition to overseeing the institution's day-to-day functions, must allocate time to be visible and create meaningful relationships with the students. In new research, Callow (2021) found that college presidents' jobs are harder than ever. Presidents face funding cuts, changing attitudes about the value of academia, and a shrinking enrollment pipeline. College leaders have long wrestled with these challenges, but the changing higher education landscape brings new urgency. Participants described a range of experiences defining the college president's role. Findings from this study indicated a less glamorous experience than some might expect. Participant 1 provided a great analogy of their current experience: "Being a president is like being on a roller coaster. There is a thrill, and then there's the kind of agony of what's ahead." Similarly, Participant 2 described it as an "amazing experience, outstanding, but it's been invigorating and challenging and rewarding all at the same time. I'd say it has been all-consuming, and that is no surprise."

Interestingly, none of the participants aspired to become college presidents when they entered higher education. Most of the college presidents described their college experience and career paths as their vocation; they were called to the presidency. Participant 8 described their experience as a vocation, not a job, and stated:

I guess I would say that I look at it as a vocation, not a job. This is my passion. I do consider it a vocation that encompasses not only the things that I value most but allows me to share with others what I have experienced as a function of education.

Similarly, Participant 6 stated:

My experience is one of a blessing. I'm grateful for the opportunity to do this. I mean, these jobs, I'm sure you know, are difficult to obtain. I was grateful for the opportunity when I was hired, and 8 years later, I still feel a tremendous amount of gratitude for the opportunity to lead this community and students. It's really a vocation; it's a calling and privilege to be a part of the higher education enterprise

These findings support studies identified in the literature review defining the college presidency as a very complex and challenging position requiring college presidents to incorporate a mix of different qualities and expectations specific to their institution's needs.

Leadership experience

Most participants ($n = 9$) described their professional leadership experiences in response to the interview question, "What professional leadership experiences do you feel are critical to be an effective liberal arts college president?" Participants reported a variety of characteristics or activities that could support a president in their role, ranging from a love of education and students to developing leadership skills through more traditional fellowships. Kauffman (1980) noted "higher education institutions need politically effective leadership, visible leadership, and leadership that cherishes the essential value of our educational institutions and their potential for dignifying humankind and shaping its destiny" (p. 113). Kauffman's idea of leadership effectiveness within the higher education landscape aligns with the findings from this research. Participants noted the importance of appreciating academia, being a real student of education, managing personnel, constructing a mission and vision for the institution, and valuing others' contributions. Participant 5 stated: "I very much look at the value and contributions of others to

help in our decision-making, and then I work very hard to be open and transparent and to be honest and trustworthy.” Participant 7 described their leadership experience as being an excellent experience:

So, I think it’s been a really great experience. I still love fighting every single day to make sure that our students have the very best experience that they can and ultimately trying to figure out how to ensure that the institution's future is not a short-term proposition.

This study showed that colleges presidents aim to sustain and build capacity, create synergies among talented people, support students' intellectual growth and development, maintain adequate revenue, and communicate and demonstrate a shared mission and vision for long-term sustainability. The presidency requires more than a hunger for the glamour of a powerful position. Being a successful president requires a commitment to the institution’s mission and a vision of the presidency as a personal and professional goal, as opposed to a “next step in one’s career” (Barwick, 2002). Participant 9 expressed this belief:

Some people want to be a college president because they view it as an opportunity to do something that will gain them recognition as somebody important, who has prestige. I don't see that so much. I actually wonder if the presidency in times gone by was more prestigious. And I think it may have been, you know, and I think now college presidents aren't viewed so much as the, you know, the most respected leader down the way it might have been in the old days. I think there's a lot of pressure on us, and you have to be willing to live with it.

Advice for aspiring college presidents

As indicated, the college presidency is a very complex and challenging position, and no one mechanism can address all professional development needs. The first step in leadership development should start with aspiring leaders researching what skills they need to become a higher education president and how they can obtain or enhance these skills in their current position (Fulton-Calkins & Milling, 2005). Key findings from this theme highlighted two important actions: (a) focus on a current job and gain the necessary experience, and (b) seek mentoring and professional development opportunities. Participant 6 advised “putting in the hard work and getting the necessary experience to be successful in this role. Understanding that the job will come to you before you get to it.” This president also suggested: “Always keep your eye on the prize that is your current job. The presidency ultimately found me because of the success I’ve had in doing other roles and having success in those roles.” College presidents should possess a set of skills, abilities, and knowledge that support their roles in this leadership position. MaryAnn Baenninger, president of Drew University in New Jersey, stated: “On the one hand, navigating a presidency is harder than ever. So, experience counts. A president has to be able to nail challenges in communications and emergency management without time to practice on the job” (as cited in Quintana, 2018, p. 2). Gaining a diverse higher education experience will provide aspiring college presidents with a greater familiarity with higher education and the presidency.

Participants discussed the importance of mentoring and taking advantage of professional development opportunities. They shared how mentoring and professional development opportunities enabled them to engage in deep self-reflection to understand leadership competencies and professional talents important for presidential success. Participant 3 explained:

“The training programs offered by our professional organizations are becoming increasingly important. I believe it’s important that one participate to get an idea of what to expect.”

Participant 8 discussed the value of mentoring: “I had several great role models and mentors who assisted me throughout my higher education career. I was blessed to have people that I knew who helped me with kind of getting to know the ropes of things.”

This study showed that more and more career paths now lead to the presidency. Many of the college presidents did not come through the typical academic route. One president had worked as a lawyer, another had a corporate background, and two presidents came up through student affairs. However, all participants highlighted the importance of mentoring and professional development to help them hone the skills needed to be effective in this role. Good leadership has never been more critical to higher education, given the myriad challenges institutions face. Most importantly, each participant indicated their willingness to mentor others because they knew firsthand how valuable that support could be to a person’s success.

Conclusions supporting Subquestion 3

The third subquestion was: What factors do college presidents believe impact their leadership? Three subthemes emerged: (a) core values, (b) changes in leadership style, and (c) adapting leadership style. These subthemes represent what drives a president in this position and how college presidents must change to remain effective in their roles.

Core values

During the interviews, all participants shared their core values and how they shaped them in their role as college president. Fulton-Calkins and Millings (2005) discussed the importance of a college president's values and suggested:

Leadership is based on a solid foundation of values; if the foundation is taken away, there is no base for leadership. Thus, the leader must not only be aware of personal values but also must clearly present those values to others within the organization. How? The obvious answer is living them daily. (p. 238)

In addition to revealing how the president's values impacted their leadership experience, this study also showed how important it is for presidents to align their values to the institution's mission and vision. A college or university president occupies the most important position in the institution, representing what Michael et al. (2001) called "the link between the internal and external constituencies; the person who voices the values and purposes for which the institution stands. It is the president who must articulate the potential for service of our institutions of higher education" (p. 332). Participant 10 explained: "I consider my role to keep the core values of the institution going while also trying to keep those present while trying to adapt the institution for the future." This study did not determine one set of values identified by all participants; however, several participants identified common values that impacted how they led. These included: (a) honesty, (b) integrity, (c) authenticity, (d) relationships, and (e) community.

Changes in leadership style and adapting leadership style

Participants in this study described ways their leadership style had changed or how they adapted their leadership style while serving in the presidency. Many of the participants ($n = 8$) were serving for the first time in the presidency role. As previously stated by MaryAnn Baenninger, president of Drew University in New Jersey, a president must be able to effectively lead an institution through challenges and crisis without time to practice on the job. Findings showed communication and human resource management were key areas participants identified as affecting their leadership style. Participants described communication as a central area of needed change or adaptation in their efforts to support the campus climate. Most notably, leading an institution through the COVID-19 pandemic increased the communication being sent to students, faculty, staff, community partners, parents, alumni, and media outlets. Over the past few years, colleges have responded to national attention regarding social justice and systematic racism that has required college presidents to communicate the institution's stance on these challenging topics. Soares et al. (2018) found that innovative leaders ultimately realize that success on any campus depends on effective campus-wide communication, decision-making, and implementation. More leaders now realize they alone cannot move the institution in a certain direction. Participant 2 provided commented on this point: "Communication has been a challenge. My communication is a constant challenge. It was true in my previous position as well; it's never good enough; it's never often enough, and it's just never enough."

Effective leadership of higher education institutions continues to be an important topic of discussion. Participants in this study described how they adapted their approach to leadership to support the many areas that impact human resource management. Interestingly, participants described their ability to adapt their leadership style to support the different human resource

management situations but indicated these situations did not require them to change their leadership style as they had their communication. Although no consensus emerged on one specific area or group within the institution, the majority of participants described experiences where they adapted their leadership style when working with specific internal or external constituent groups. Most notably, participants discussed the ability to adapt their leadership style to make the hard decisions and implement them. These decisions, as described by participants, addressed situations with students, cabinet members, the board of trustees, alumni, and faculty. As described in Chapter 2, the premise of contingency theory involves the match between leadership style and a specific situation. Contingency theorists highlight the ability of an effective leader to adapt their leadership style to meet a situation's requirements. Fiedler (1978) suggested that "leadership effectiveness is a function of the interaction between the leader and the leadership situation" (cited in Peters et al., 1985, p. 274).

Conclusions supporting Subquestion 4

The fourth subquestion was: What are the leadership skills that college presidents believe are most critical for responding to the challenges of their job? The subthemes related to this question were leadership skills and leadership styles. They highlighted the qualities that participants promoted as essential for success. College presidents must implement leadership skills that help the institution operate efficiently and successfully, ultimately improving the institution's finances. Effective leaders engage in an influence process, seeking constructive change and establishing a shared mission and vision across the organization.

Leadership skills

In the 21st century, ever-changing circumstances require a different type of leader to be effective in this complex position. MacTaggart (2017) suggested:

American higher education must redefine the work of its presidents if it is to meet today's challenges and those fast approaching on the horizon. The effectiveness and, in a growing number of cases, the very survival of a college or university requires leaders who make a clear-eyed appraisal of their institution's competitive position in the market for higher education services, bring an entrepreneurial spirit to their work, and possess the talent to advance the enterprise in the face of often conflicting demands. (p. 1)

Participants in this study described many skills they believed were essential for their success. However, effective communication was the only skill mentioned by most participants. Other skills or characteristics described by participants included flexibility, intellectual intelligence, emotional intelligence, courage, collaboration, the ability to make difficult decisions, a sense of humor, managerial abilities, nimbleness, hiring acuity, innovativeness, human development, and risk-taker. Almost all of the participants discussed the importance of communicating effectively as a college president. Participant 1 described communication as a process of flow:

I've always kind of had this cascading communications philosophy where you have got to give people as much as you can as soon as you can. You have to know the right amount of information to communicate and what you know here has to funnel down, and the funnel definitely narrows, but it can't get clogged.

Participant 7 emphasized

communication and particularly my passion for transparency. Communication skills are really important always, but even more so perhaps in the pandemic that people have faith in what you're communicating, and if they don't have honesty and trust in you, then that's a problem.

Participant 8 added: "Communication is essential. You need to communicate then what's going to happen, why it's going to happen, what we're going to do, how we expect to come out of this."

Participants discussed the importance of communication in different contexts, from learning how to read people, communicating a shared mission across multiple internal and external constituent groups, appreciating ethnic and ideological diversity, active listening, empathy, and transparency. Participant 9 discussed the importance of being candid and transparent at all times:

You have to be completely candid and transparent when you meet with all of our employees. But I think the combination of being fully transparent with people and at the same time reassuring them that we will be in good shape.

Participants also described effective communication as a vital skill to gain trust, align strategic efforts in pursuing achieving institutional goals, build relationships, achieve integrated philanthropy across the institution, and effectively motivate and inspire positive change.

Participant 1 explained the impact of communication amongst different constituent groups:

Presidents have to have a certain amount of integrity, so you want people to trust you, so you have to keep people informed. And you need to establish open communication between and among all groups of stakeholders. So, when you go out and communicate,

you've got to know the right amount of information to communicate. Transparency and clarity of operations dictate decision-making.

Leadership styles

Effective leadership of higher education institutions continues to be an important topic of discussion. All participants described different leadership styles they found useful in their role as college president. As previous research on leadership indicated, no single leadership style emerged as critical to successfully leading a college campus. However, a common theme among all participants' stated leadership styles was their ability to serve members of the institution through collaboration, team building, empowerment, openness and transparency, candor, valuing others, empathy, vulnerability, trust, and being decisive. Characteristics of servant leadership emerged as a key finding illustrated throughout the participants' responses. The term "servant leader" was coined by Robert Greenleaf in 1970 in the essay, "What is Servant Leadership?" where he stated:

A servant-leader focuses primarily on the growth and well-being of people and the communities to which they belong. While traditional leadership generally involves the accumulation and exercise of power by one at the "top of the pyramid," servant leadership is different. The servant-leader shares power puts the needs of others first and helps people develop and perform as highly as possible. (Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership, 2021)

Conclusions supporting the overarching research question

The overarching research question was: How do private liberal arts college presidents perceive and describe their leadership experience? The challenges and complexities of the role of a college president have changed dramatically over the past several decades. According to the ACE (2012), “College and university presidents lead complex organizations amid increasing pressure and diverse constituencies. They are tasked with providing intellectual leadership, embodying institutional values, and shaping wide-ranging policy” (p. 1). This study captured the essence of the college president's leadership experiences as very challenging but also very rewarding. It was evident from the participants’ responses that today’s college president must engage in significant crisis management. Most notably, the global pandemic of COVID-19 significantly impacted college campuses in addition to concerns about social justice and systematic racism, the polarized political landscape in the United States, student loan issues, tuition reset challenges, declining enrollments, and rapid technological advancements. According to Klann (2003), these crises can negatively affect people in an organization, which is often the most pernicious and difficult challenge leaders face when dealing with a crisis. But leaders can act to reduce the probability of a crisis reoccurring, shorten the crisis duration, and soften its negative impact by addressing the human elements before, during, and after it occurs (p. 3). Participants noted that their recent experience had involved short-term crises and the need to make many urgent decisions, look at strategic planning and vision, and consider long-term sustainability and institutional change.

Participants also described their experience as very rewarding and humbling. In addition to the position’s complexities and challenges, participants described how their experience as a college president gave them tremendous joy in enabling students to achieve their personal and

professional goals. Participants' passion for intellectual curiosity, commitment to student development, and willingness to connect to the institution and serve its many constituent groups showed in their responses during the interview process.

The key findings from the interviews suggested that although each president demonstrated a unique leadership style based on their strengths, values, beliefs, and experiences, it is important for a college president to implement a leadership style appropriate for the moment and for the institution they serve. The results from this study can be used to enhance the many presidents' fellowships and leadership programs that equip aspiring college presidents to become innovative and highly effective college presidents.

Recommendations for future studies

This qualitative, phenomenological study included 10 college presidents from private liberal arts institutions in the commonwealth of Pennsylvania, so expanding the sample to include college presidents from private liberal arts institutions throughout the country could enable researchers to cross-examine leadership experiences of college presidents from a broader region. In addition, studies that also include interviews with individuals to whom the presidents report (i.e., boards of trustees) and with individuals who report directly to the presidents (i.e., cabinet members) could provide additional insight into what makes a college president effective.

In addition, studies focused on college presidents who have not taken the traditional academic pathway to the college presidency would provide a deeper understanding of what leadership skills have been lost and gained and which are best suited to navigate tomorrow's higher education challenges.

Limitations

This phenomenological study offered a preliminary view of the essence of how college presidents perceived and described their leadership experiences at private liberal arts institutions in the commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Limitations included limiting factors associated with phenomenological investigations. Although the data collected pertained to the essence of the lived leadership experience of college presidents, other perspectives to validate the leadership experiences described by these participants were not explored, such as the interactivity between the college presidents and their direct reports (i.e., cabinet members) and superiors (i.e., boards of trustees) impacts how these individuals lead, the absence of these individuals' perspectives also represented a limitation.

Most notably, members of the board of trustees must conduct organizational oversight, directing and evaluating the college president. Comparing how trustees evaluate college presidents to how those presidents perceive and describe their own leadership experiences would validate what leadership skills enable presidents to lead their respective institutions most effectively.

Another limitation to this study is that it was conducted during a global pandemic 'COVID-19' and at a time in the United States when racial and social justice reform efforts were at an all-time high following the death of George Floyd. COVID-19 is caused by a coronavirus called SARS-CoV-2. The impact of this virus caused many colleges and universities throughout the country to shutdown and convert to remote learning. The impact of this global pandemic increased the level of crisis management and crisis leadership at all post-secondary institutions throughout the country.

Conclusions

This study's aim was to use the theoretical framework of descriptive phenomenology to explore the reported leadership experiences of college presidents at private liberal arts institutions throughout the commonwealth of Pennsylvania. The study results included the following themes: (a) perceived challenges of a college president, (b) critical experiences for college presidents, (c) impactful factors on leadership, (d) critical leadership skills for college presidents, and (e) leadership experience of a college president.

As a vice president of student affairs, I have the privilege of working closely with the president at my current institution and have worked closely with several other presidents at previous institutions during my career in higher education. As an aspiring college president, conducting these interviews allowed me to gain a better understanding of the college president's role, their day-to-day operations, the challenges they face, the best practices they rely on to overcome those challenges, and the vast range of leadership skills they draw from to support the many functions associated with this role. Conducting this study also enabled me to walk in their shoes as they vividly described their leadership experiences as college presidents. Through this experience, I gained a better understanding of the complexities and the challenges they face regarding budgets, fundraising, organizational management, communication, enrollments, and overall institutional management.

A key takeaway regarding the essence of leadership is influence, and the essence of influence is understanding. When describing their leadership experience, participants discussed the many stakeholders they engaged with daily, including cabinet members, board of trustees, students, parents, alumni, donors, community partners, media outlets, faculty, and staff. Participants described their ability to influence a member of the campus community by

effectively communicating a shared mission and vision designed to lead the institution into the future. The presidents all expressed that the president's role at a small liberal arts institution is very demanding. Although they demonstrated confidence in their roles, securing their institution's future was not a short-term proposition. The presidents recognized the task required them to pursue creative solutions to problems, remain open to innovation, and include community partners. They also acknowledged the need to create additional revenue streams, hire a strong leadership team, and embrace changes to technology, pedagogy, and student demographics. Although this study, with its small sample size, was not intended to be generalizable to all small private liberal arts institutions in the United States, the participants' information added value to the research on this topic by describing their leadership experiences, the challenges they faced in their roles, the leadership skills they relied on to address these challenges, and the professional experiences they believed aspiring college presidents should possess.

The results from this study also suggest college presidents have an important role to play in providing normative leadership to support and guide their institutions through a multitude of expected and unknown challenges and crises. Most notably, all participants highlighted challenges they faced with crisis management and crisis leadership. Typically, hiring committees do not consider these competencies when interviewing college presidents. However, the 21st-century college president has been tasked with effectively leading their institutions through times of crisis, including a global pandemic, social justice upheaval, sexual misconduct allegations, budget cuts, decreased enrollments, and faculty and staff layoffs and furloughs. As the higher education landscape continues to change, today's college presidents not only must be creative and innovative, but they must also be able to implement crisis leadership through effective

decision-making, preparation, sense-making, meaning-making, and communication. These skills are critical to sustaining higher education intuitions through times of unforeseen crises and challenges. Consequently, current and future college presidents should participate in training and professional development practices for improving preparedness associated with crisis leadership and crisis management.

I greatly enjoyed the opportunity to interview college presidents regarding their leadership experiences. Through this experience, I believe college presidents are most effective when their personal values, leadership skills, expertise, and previous work experiences align with the mission, vision, and needs of the institution. I was also surprised that none of the participants aspired to become a college president. The decision to pursue the presidency came later in their careers when an opportunity was presented. Presidents play a critical role in supporting the growth and development of their institutions. Given the complexities associated with the role of a college president in the 21st century, my believe is that we will see more individuals outside of academia sought after to lead these institutions. The traditional academia route to the presidency does not provide these individuals with the diversified experience -outside of academia- to effectively lead an institution through current challenges of financial growth, tuition reset, declining enrollments, crisis management, and other nuances of higher education.

Much of what has been revealed through the results of this research confirms the assertion of previous research but given there is dismal research on leadership experience of college presidents at private institution, here are a few new discoveries. The most significant findings of this study are:

1. The essence of leadership is influence and the essence of influence is understanding.

2. It is important for a college president to implement a leadership style appropriate for the moment and for the institution they serve.
3. Today's college president must be able to effectively communicate to a multitude of internal and external constituent groups.
4. Crisis management and leadership skills are critical for a college president to effectively lead their institutions in the 21st century.
5. College presidents must implement leadership skills that help the institution operate efficiently and successfully, ultimately improving the institution's finances. Effective leaders engage in an influence process, seeking constructive change and establishing a shared mission and vision across the organization.
6. This study revealed how the president's values impacted their leadership experience, and how important it is for presidents to align their values to the institution's mission and vision. Furthermore, findings described ways president's leadership style had changed or how they adapted their leadership style while serving in the presidency.
7. This study revealed that all presidents have a different standard for what leadership represents and the standard evolves based on experience and time.
8. The study revealed that the role of a college president is very demanding and complex. A college president must be able to delegate work to senior leadership and be competent in their ability to develop leaders around them.
9. Presidents must demonstrate the ability to influence members of the campus community to support the institutions mission and vision through shared governance, relationship building, trust, transparency, collaboration, and willingness to listen to all points of view.

I believe this study supports the workforce education mission by providing information about what skills leaders need to step into the presidency position and how the scope of this position has evolved to support today's higher education landscape. The college president's interviews described their role as more than just an occupation but as a vocation or a calling. In analyzing the data obtained from each interview, I noticed a direct correlation between the leadership experiences of the college presidents and the four ethical obligations of a workforce education professional. Each of the college presidents implemented the four ethical obligations of the workforce education professional: (a) promote learning, (b) ensure health and safety, (c) protect the public or private trust, and (d) promote the transfer of learning. These presidents pride their work on including absolute integrity at all levels—in all aspects of their jobs and personal lives. As suggested by Participant 3, "There is no way to do this job well if you can't set the example from the top."

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Appendix A

Exemption Determination



PennState

Office for Research Protections

Vice President for Research
The Pennsylvania State University
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University Park, PA 16802

814-865-1775

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EXEMPTION DETERMINATION

Date: December 21, 2020

From: Joanie Tan,

To: Joseph Webb, Jr.

Type of Submission:	Initial Study
Title of Study:	A PHENOMONOLOGICAL STUDY OF LEADERSHIP EXPERIENCES OF COLLEGE PRESIDENTS AT PRIVATE LIBERAL ARTS INSTITUTIONS
Principal Investigator:	Joseph Webb, Jr.
Study ID:	STUDY00016708
Submission ID:	STUDY00016708
Funding:	Not Applicable
Documents Approved:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • HRP-591 - Protocol for Human Subject Research Webb (3).pdf (3), Category: IRB Protocol • Joseph Webb (0.02), Category: Data Collection Instrument

The Office for Research Protections determined that the proposed activity, as described in the above-referenced submission, does not require formal IRB review because the research met the criteria for exempt research according to the policies of this institution and the provisions of applicable federal regulations.

Continuing Progress Reports are **not** required for exempt research. Record of this research determined to be exempt will be maintained for five years from the date of this notification. If your research will continue beyond five years, please contact the Office for Research Protections closer to the determination end date.

Changes to exempt research only need to be submitted to the Office for Research Protections in limited circumstances described in the below-referenced Investigator Manual. If changes are being considered and there are questions about whether IRB review is needed, please contact the Office for Research Protections.

Penn State researchers are required to follow the requirements listed in the Investigator Manual ([HRP-103](#)), which can be found by navigating to the IRB Library within CATS IRB (<http://irb.psu.edu>).

We would like to know how the IRB Program can better serve you.
Please fill out our survey; it should take about a minute: <https://www.research.psu.edu/irb/feedback>.

ID27

Appendix B
Sample Participant Letter

Dear President _____,

I'm excited to contact you about a research study that will focus on the leadership experiences of private liberal arts college presidents throughout the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. I have identified 15 college presidents throughout the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania who serve at private liberal arts colleges with undergraduate enrollments between 800 and 2,000 students. This is the intended population for my study, and I hope you will agree to participate.

My name is Joe Webb, and I have completed my course work for my doctoral program at The Pennsylvania State University. I am working on my dissertation and the research model I am using is a qualitative one through which I am seeking comprehensive depictions or descriptions of your leadership experience as a college president at a private liberal arts institution. This project is research being conducted as partial fulfillment of the requirements for my dissertation.

Through your participation as a co-researcher, I hope to understand the essence of leadership characteristics as it reveals itself in your experience. I will conduct a Zoom interview (approximately 60 minutes) with you. I hope to speak with you and confirm your participation in this study. I would like to conduct this interview anytime between January-March of 2021. With your permission, I would like to record the interview so I can transcribe your responses then code and analyze them to identify the textual description of the meanings and essence of the phenomenon. All participants and institutions will remain anonymous.

I do understand there are demands on your schedule. However, I would be grateful to speak with you and answer additional questions about the scope of this study.

Thank you for your consideration of this invitation. Please let me know via email at your earliest convenience if you will participate. I hope that the results from this study will help support future aspiring private liberal arts college presidents on better understanding the leadership experiences, perceived challenges, and professional experiences critical to be an effective private liberal arts college president in the 21st century. I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Kind regards,

Joseph J. Webb

Ph.D. Candidate

Appendix C
Letter to Participants

Dear President _____,

Thank you for your interest and for agreeing to participate in my dissertation research on the leadership experiences of college presidents at private liberal arts institutions. I value the unique contribution you can make to my study and I am excited that you have agreed to participate in it. This letter reiterates some things we have discussed and to secure your signature on the participation-release form you will find attached to this letter.

I am using a qualitative phenomenological research model to conduct this study. Using a phenomenological method is the best way to answer my research question: “How do private liberal arts college presidents perceive and describe their leadership experiences?”

Through your participation as a co-researcher, I hope to understand the essence of your leadership style as it reveals itself in your experience as a college president. You will be asked interview questions to recall specific episodes, situations, or events you experience about leadership, challenges, and previous professional experiences that support your role as president. I am seeking vivid, accurate, and honest portrayals of your experience leading a college campus.

I value your participation and thank you for your commitment of time, energy, and effort. If you have further questions before signing the release form or if changes need to be made to the interview date/time, please contact me. I can be reached via email at jjw26@psu.edu or by cell at (610) 944-2748. As discussed, our interview is scheduled for (date) at (time).

Appendix D

Webb – Leadership Experiences of Presidents at Private Liberal Arts Institutions Interview Protocol

<Note: Interviewees are interviewed in person once throughout the project (second interviews are welcomed and are up to the co-researcher's discretion). These open-ended questions are the same for each interview. The intent is to identify emerging themes from each participant as it relates to leadership experiences, challenges, and professional experiences critical for future aspiring private liberal arts college presidents.>

Live Interview

Thank you for meeting with me today via zoom. I greatly appreciate your willingness to share your unique and personal thoughts on your experience leading an institution. First, I would like to confirm you are still ok with recording this interview so it can be transcribed for this research project. <The researcher will ensure he has the approval of the participant to record, if not, the researcher will continue the interview without recording, using the notetaking method detailed.>

In the 21st era, the college presidency is a complex role. To date, there is no one set leadership style associated with the effectiveness of leading a college or university. However, this research is intended to identify the “essence” of the leadership experience and challenges associated with the role of a college president. I hope that the benefits of this study may lead to a deeper understanding of the essence of college president’s leadership experiences, advancing a greater comprehension of the complexities of presidential leadership at small private institutions. The results from this research can help support presidents, future research, and aspiring private

liberal arts college presidents on better understanding the leadership experiences, perceived challenges, and professional experiences critical to be an effective private liberal arts college president in the 21st century. The literature review for this study helped to identify the following interview questions to support the research questions for this study.

Questions:

<Some questions are followed by probing questions for deeper detail on the lived experience and/or richness of the stories as described. Each participant will receive the transcribed interview for an opportunity to make changes and additions or to further elaborate on their responses.>

1. As a college president, how do you describe your experience in leading this institution?
2. What skills and strengths do you bring to your leadership role?
<this is a probe for additional clarification>
 - a. How have you measured the effectiveness of these skills/strengths?
3. What is your definition of leadership? What do you believe your overarching purpose is as a college president?
4. What are the most difficult challenges you face as a college president, and what steps have you taken to meet such challenges?
5. As a private liberal arts college president, what do you consider your leadership style to be?
<this is a probe for additional clarification>
 - a. How effective has this leadership style been in leading your campus?
6. Tell me about a time you adapted your leadership style to support the campus community and or specific situation?
7. How would your colleagues describe your leadership style (faculty/staff who report directly to you)?
8. What professional leadership experiences do you feel are critical to be an effective liberal arts college president?
<this is a probe for additional clarification>
 - a. Why do you feel these experiences are critical?
9. What advice would you give to higher education professionals aspiring to become a private liberal arts college president?
10. What are your five core values and how do they shape how you lead?
<this is a probe for additional clarification>
 - a. Do you feel your core values align with the institutions mission and vision? If so, how?

11. What are the leadership skills you believe are most critical for responding to the challenges associated with the role of a college president?
12. Has your leadership style changed since becoming a college president?
<this is a probe for additional clarification>
 - a. If so, what factors affected your leadership style?
13. Is there any additional information you would like to share?

Thank you so much for meeting with me today. I have greatly valued the information you provided on your experience leading a college campus. Once your interview is transcribed, I will email you a copy for your review.

Vita

Over ten years progressive experience in Student Affairs including enrollment and student development, coordinating veterans' services, staff supervision, budgeting, strategic planning, admissions, data collection and analysis, diversity, equity, and inclusion, athletics, commuter services, grant writing, and supervising key student and student affairs units. As a student affairs director, I have allied with organization leaders to align with and support college students in their pursuit of a college degree and beyond. Have a well-rounded academic background, with practical knowledge of and experience in change management, leadership, diversity, recruitment, retention, and organizational development. Demonstrated the ability to build and retain high-performance teams by hiring, developing, and motivating skilled professionals.

Professional Highlights

- Effective communicator with well-developed writing, public speaking, and presentation skills.
- A proven record of developing collaborative and goal achieving relationships with colleagues, faculty, staff, students, state leaders, community, and alumni.
- A proven record of strong fiscal and budget management skills.
- Experienced student affairs director with a successful history of effective leadership, strategic planning, recruitment and retention, program design, budget management, and data collection and analysis.
- Decisive team leader with experience in recruiting, hiring, developing staff while creating a positive, productive work environment through effective supervision, conflict resolution, and a strong commitment to professional development.

Formal Education

Pennsylvania State University, State College, PA

Ph.D. Candidate in Workforce Education and Development – December 2021

University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, Eau Claire, WI

Master of Education in Professional Development – May 2011

Marietta College, Marietta, OH

Bachelor of Arts in Communication-December 2007