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# The Organizational Behavior of University Presidents at Hispanic Serving Institutions: A Critical Incident Analysis

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in Education

by

Isaac Manuel Jesus Castro

Committee in charge:

Dean and Professor Jeffrey Milem, Chair

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June 2024

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May 2024

The Organizational Behavior of University Presidents at Hispanic Serving Institutions:

A Critical Incident Analysis

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Isaac Manuel Jesus Castro

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my family for sacrificing and supporting me throughout my life, even when it was not easy. My first teacher, my Mom, put her own education aside to raise me, keep me safe, and teach me right from wrong. Vo, one of the smartest people I have ever known, showed me how to be strong-willed, community-minded, and hard-working. Va, forever my biggest cheerleader, modeled what a life-long, natural love for reading and learning looks like. Nana, a true activist and lover of life, exemplified an enduring positivity and a commitment to always fighting for what is right. Lou, one of my closest confidants, has been one of the best friends a brother could ask for. And Jess, tiny but mighty, helped me through this dissertation by spending time with me when I needed to take my mind off the work.

I would also like to thank my dissertation committee. My advisor, Dean Jeff Milem, has been a constant source of support, spending countless hours with me over the past six years and supporting me personally, academically, and professionally. Dr. Rebeca Mireles-Rios and Dr. Sharon Conley have both provided me with advice, words of support, and many opportunities. I have undoubtedly learned a great deal from them as scholars and I am incredibly appreciative and proud to have had this “dream team” in my corner from the start.

I also want to thank my Dad for always keeping my faith that good leaders can and do exist. Watching him rise, succeed, and be challenged as a leader in spaces never built for us has continued to be a persevering force in my own career, research, and worldview. Quite simply, I would not have gotten to this point without him.

Lastly, I want to thank my wife, Marilyn Castro. At 19, we never could have imagined tackling the doctorate together. At 36, I could not envision it any other way. Navigating this incredibly difficult journey together has helped me push through knowing that we have great days ahead.

Sincerely,

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**Castro, I. M. J.** (2018). *Obstacles and successes of male university presidents: A qualitative study of diverse leaders at public universities* (Master's thesis). California State University, Fresno.

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## Honors and Awards

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Co-PI on Latinos for Education Research Consulting Contract, **$30,000+** (2023-Present, UCSB)
Resilient Interdisciplinary Social-Ecological (RISE) Graduate Fellowship, **$8,500** (2023, UCSB)
Summer Teaching Institute for Associates, **$1,000** (2023, UCSB)
Foundational Support Grants from Department of Education, **$2100** (2022-23, UCSB)
Graduate Technology Subsidy Grant, **$1000** (2023, UCSB)
Travel Support Grants from Department of Education, **$1800** (2019, 2023, UCSB)
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ABSTRACT

The Organizational Behavior of University Presidents at Hispanic Serving Institutions: A Critical Incident Analysis

by

Isaac Manuel Jesus Castro

Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs) play a leading role in supporting educational equity, enrolling two-thirds of all U.S. Latino students despite representing less than a fifth of all American higher education institutions. These colleges and universities manage to provide substantial support and prioritize student-centered organizational outcomes with limited resources, receiving nearly a third less federal funding per student compared to the national average. This makes the study of their leadership practices not only relevant but essential for broadening our understanding of effective educational leadership under constraints.

This qualitative multiple case study explores the organizational behavior of university presidents at Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs) by focusing on their navigation of the job, which is shaped by shared governance, diverse student needs, and external pressures. By examining decision-making processes and leadership approaches, this study aims to enhance the effectiveness of colleges and universities in supporting their diverse student bodies. This work not only contributes to academic knowledge but also provides a wide range of perspectives on managing and leading schools in an increasingly diverse

educational landscape and offers practical insights for improving leadership across all types of higher education institutions.

Using a thematic analytical approach, this research examined two rounds of semi-structured interviews with 12 California HSI presidents from various backgrounds and institutional contexts. The Critical Incident Technique (CIT) was employed to investigate 38 critical incidents by the leaders' utilization of five dimensions of organizational behavior: collegial, bureaucratic, political, systemic, and symbolic. The results indicate that leadership at HSIs typically consists of a multidimensional approach, where presidents often leverage layered strategies to resolve institutional issues. Additionally, the adaptability of leadership approaches in response to various critical incidents and factors—such as the type of institution, source of the incident, and the president's level of experience—points to the importance of context-dependent practices and decision-making.

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction

This study contributes to our understanding of the organizational behavior of university leaders, specifically those who preside over Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs). The findings from this study may inform the development of existing or innovative strategies for improving the practices and approaches of university presidents at HSIs or any other type of higher education institution. It also furthers our understanding of the way university presidents arrive at and come to know their institutions. Ultimately, this research supports long-standing efforts to establish a positive and supportive educational environment for campus constituents of all backgrounds and identities. This chapter provides a brief overview of HSIs, university leadership and organizational behavior and how they can be incorporated into this study.

### Background of the Study

The persistent inequality and gaps in achievement that students of color, and other marginalized groups, have experienced in education across time serves as the backdrop for this study (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Gandara & Contreras, 2009; Madrid, 2011). In the United States, students of color, especially Latino and Black students, have historically had higher attrition rates and lower academic achievement than White students. The achievement gap, referring to persistent disparities based on socioeconomic status, race, or ethnicity, is also evident in standardized test scores, graduation rates, and college enrollment and completion rates. Figure 1 below illustrates the gap in college completion by race that only exacerbates when measuring degree attainment rates for those same groups (Mora, 2022). For lower income or rural students, the gap in college completion is even more pronounced. Scholars

argue the achievement gap is fueled by poverty, racial segregation, a lack of access to quality education, and the implicit bias embedded in our educational system (Merolla & Jackson, 2019). While some progress has been made in closing the achievement gap, there is considerably more work to be done. Some efforts to combat the achievement gap have included increased funding for poor schools (Rothstein, 2004), implementing culturally responsive curriculum and teaching practices (Bernak et al., 2005), and increasing access to early childhood education programs (Jeynes, 2015).

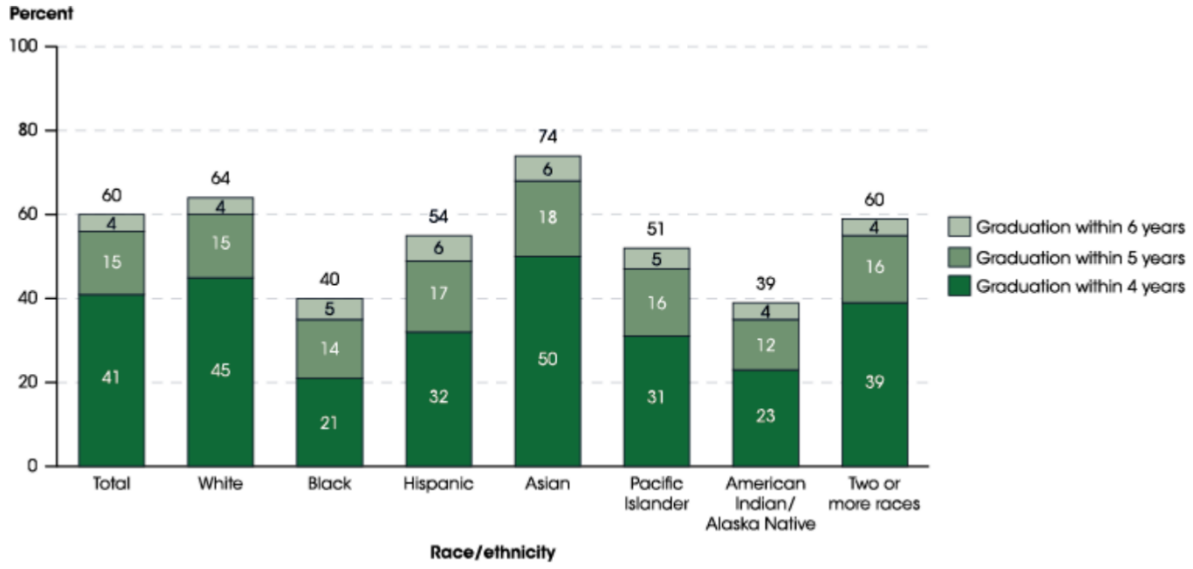


Figure 1. *Graduation rates from first institution attended for first-time, full-time bachelor's degree-seeking students at 4-year postsecondary institutions, by race/ethnicity and time to completion: Cohort entry year 2010 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017).*

### *Hispanic Serving Institutions*

While most institutions claim to prioritize student support, some have made more substantive headway in producing organizational outcomes that address the needs of historically marginalized students, such as basic needs support, degree completion and graduate employment (Turner et al., 2017). For example, Hispanic Serving Institutions

(HSIs) excel at supporting Latino college students compared to non-HSIs (Espinosa et al., 2017). HSI is a designation granted by the federal government to public or private non-profit institutions of higher education that have at least 25 percent Latino undergraduate student enrollment. This federal program, which officially began in 1992, provides additional funds to support these institutions. HSI funding is intended to serve students of all races and ethnicities, and it can be used in academic efforts such as investments in campus programs, curriculum development, instructional infrastructure, or any other student support service. This funding is crucial considering, on average, HSIs receive $3,117 per student from federal revenue sources, such as grants for improving institutional infrastructure or for enhancing teaching and learning resources (HACU, 2022). This is over 32 percent lower than the $4,605 per student national average, meaning HSIs are achieving more than their counterparts with fewer dollars.

The number of Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs) in America more than tripled between 2000 to 2020 (Murphy, 2022). There were 229 HSIs in 2000, but by 2019 the number of recognized institutions reached 902, a total that includes an additional group of institutions described as ‘emerging HSIs’, which enroll anywhere between 15 and 24 percent Latino undergraduate students (Excelencia in Education, 2020). Of the 902 HSIs identified, 333 are emerging HSIs and 569 are full HSIs. Emerging HSIs have seen similarly large gains in their numbers, more than doubling since 1994-1995. California leads the way with 127 HSIs, 76% of which are 2-year institutions (Contreras & Contreras, 2015). These institutions collectively enroll 2.2 million Latino students–with nearly 967,000 in California alone. Across the nation, HSIs are disproportionately community colleges and public universities because they often serve a larger proportion of racially diverse and lower

income student populations, which typically includes high rates of Latino students. However, among private schools, many faith-based institutions and small liberal arts colleges have also achieved HSI status in recent decades. Astoundingly, HSIs enroll 67% of all US Latino students despite making up only 18% of all American higher education institutions (HACU, 2022). These HSIs also enroll more Black students (482,211) than all Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) who enroll a total of 211,774 (NCES, 2021a). The same can be said about Native American students, 23,966 of which are enrolled in HSIs–much more than the 11,459 that Tribal Colleges enroll at any given time (NCES, 2021b).

Hispanic Serving Institutions play an impactful role in American education due to their rapidly increasing numbers on top of the vast number of students they currently enroll, as well as the socioeconomically diverse students they serve. That impact elevates the need for us to learn how (and how well) these institutions are reaching desired organizational outcomes, such as heightened enrollment and retention of their students. Recent research has indicated that leaders of HSIs are contributing to the achievement of organizational outcomes, such as basic needs support, degree completion and graduate employment, through their priorities and decisions (Cuellar, 2015; Castro & Castro, 2017; Garcia & Ramirez, 2018), but also that more investigation is required to understand these institutions (Contreras, Malcom & Bensimon, 2008; Cuellar, 2014).

### *University Leadership and Constraints of the Position*

University presidents operate with constraints that often do not exist for leaders of organizations outside of higher education. For one, university presidents share power, or "governance", with the faculty and their board, which limits their authority from both above

and below in the organizational chart (Birnbaum, 1989b). Secondly, isomorphism runs rampant through higher education, where institutions are pressured to operate under the same processes or structures due to imitation or shared constraints (Berger & Milem, 2000). However, as HSIs underscore, different institutions comprise different missions, values, and priorities, so what is successful in one institution may not be in another. Thirdly, university leaders preside over a wide array of constituents with wildly varied priorities, perspectives, and perceptions (Cohen & March, 1974). A decision that excites students may infuriate the faculty; while another decision meant to appease athletics boosters may disillusion campus activists. Finally, higher education institutions typically have funding structures and levels of public scrutiny unseen in other organizational contexts.

Given those constraints, university presidents must view organizations through multiple frames and respond accordingly (Gallos & Bolman, 2021). A university president cannot take a purely structural approach because they simply do not have the total authority required, especially in public institutions (Bensimon, Birnbaum & Neumann, 1989). They also cannot exercise full control of the environment that affects their organization–colleges and universities are affected by societal whims and the external regulations imposed upon them. The COVID-19 pandemic is just one example of this. Further, much like a brain, the cybernetic structure of colleges and universities creates a decentralized operation where any one part, including the president, could be removed and yet still function adequately (Birnbaum, 1992). Recent shifts towards privatization have also made it so that "administrators may have little option except to respond to the marketplace" so they prioritize the financial bottom-line over what is best for students (Birnbaum & Eckel, 2005, pg. 352). Additionally, the culture of an institution may be deeply ingrained by its history,

the local community, and the lived experience of its constituents. While a university leader may be able to meaningfully interpret and engage a campus culture or its subcultures, it is much more difficult to substantively transform that culture. Symbolic leadership is yet another form of organizational behavior available to university presidents, but results may be unpredictable. University presidents serve as "the first among equals" to their faculty, and the virtual face of the university to everyone else. This gives them some latitude and incentive to use symbolic leadership under certain circumstances, such as through campus rituals or the usage of relevant artifacts, to achieve desired organizational outcomes. Each of the above mentioned dimensions of organizational behavior have their limitations for university presidents, but they each may still be useful depending on the circumstance.

### *A Proposition for Examination*

In America, our educational institutions were built to accommodate White people (Patton, 2016). And despite recent gains in college enrollment rates for people of color, degree attainment rates by race are not equal. Figure 2 below (Reber & Smith, 2023) shows that Black and Latino adults are still much less likely to graduate with a college degree than their White or Asian counterparts. The inequities across race continue through the academic pipeline where nearly three quarters of full-time faculty and over 80% of college administrators are White (CUPA-HR, 2022; NCES, 2022). This means students of color are navigating mostly historically White institutions where they are being taught and led by people who may be unfamiliar with their background, experiences, and perspectives and thus unable to effectively communicate or engage with them. This landscape leaves considerable space for innovation and improvements upon business as usual, specifically as it pertains to serving students of color and other historically marginalized communities. If

HSIs are doing well in achieving desired organizational goals pertaining to Latino college students, such as basic needs support, degree completion and graduate employment, then other institutions interested in mitigating inequities would benefit from learning more about how HSIs are being led.

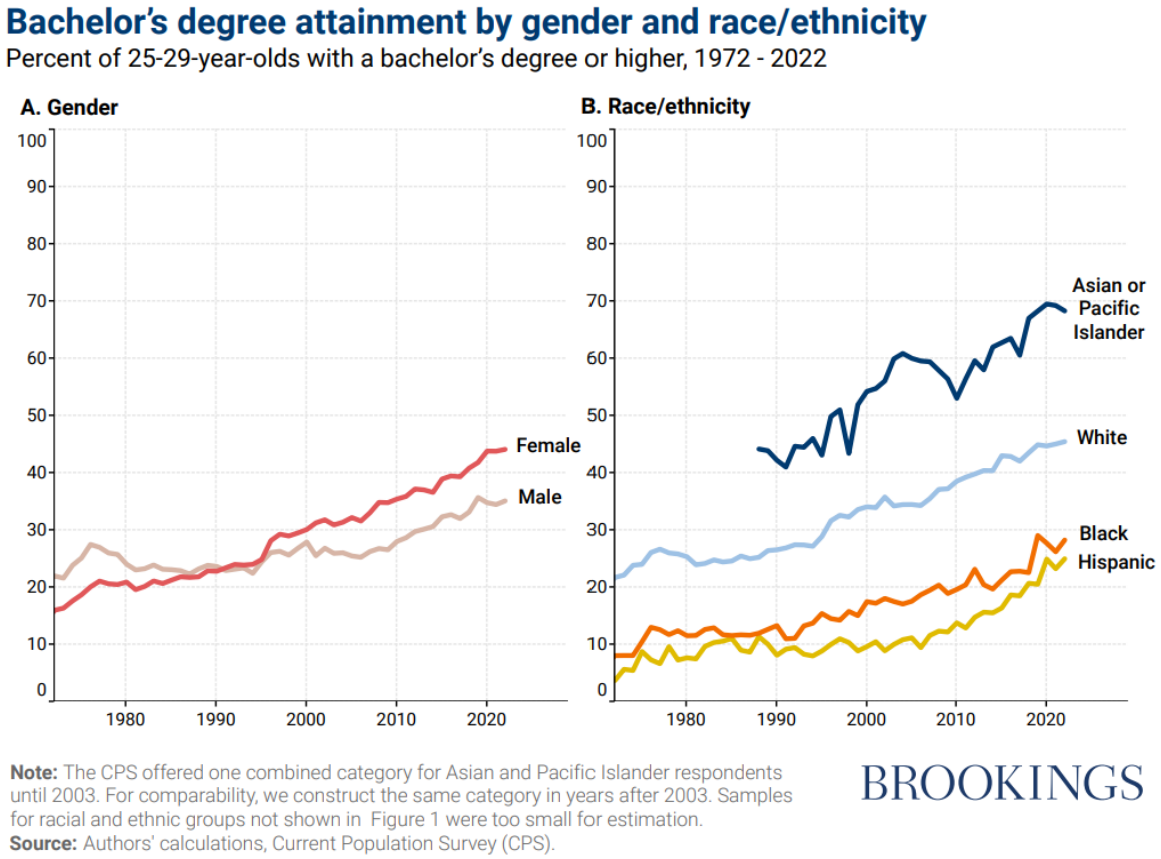


Figure 2. *College degree attainment rates by race over time (Reber & Smith, 2023).*

**Purpose of the Study**

The core goal and objective for this research aims to further inform our understanding of the organizational behavior of university presidents at HSIs. Specifically, it will explore what types of organizational behavior they have used on the job during self-identified critical incidents. A critical incident analysis was selected because it allows for the identification of key behaviors and decisions of university presidents, assists in our

understanding of how they respond to crises, and highlights leadership competencies required to successfully lead their institutions. For the purpose of this study, Berger and Milem's (2000) multidimensional meta-model of organizational behavior will be utilized. Further described in Chapter 2, this model breaks organizational behavior into five conceptual categories: (a) bureaucratic, (b) collegial, (c) political, (d) symbolic, and (e) systemic. Second, this study will expand upon our knowledge of the pressing issues that face Hispanic Serving institutions, an exceptionally diverse and increasingly prevalent institutional type. Colleges and universities have never been as compositionally diverse as they are today, so it is increasingly important to understand how the most diverse institutions are operating. College enrollment for Latino students has rapidly increased over the past 50 years, with a nearly 455.9% increase in their share of the student population since 1976 (Hanson, 2022). Just since 2000, Latinos have seen their college enrollment rates jump from 22% to 36% while White college student enrollment has only increased 3 percent, from 39% to 42% (Hussar, 2020). As can be seen in Figure 3 below, nearly 1 in 5 college students in America identify as Latino (Mora, 2022). With more increases on the horizon for Latino students, and non-traditional students of all types, it is imperative for educators and leaders to optimize best practices in serving and communicating with students from these backgrounds.

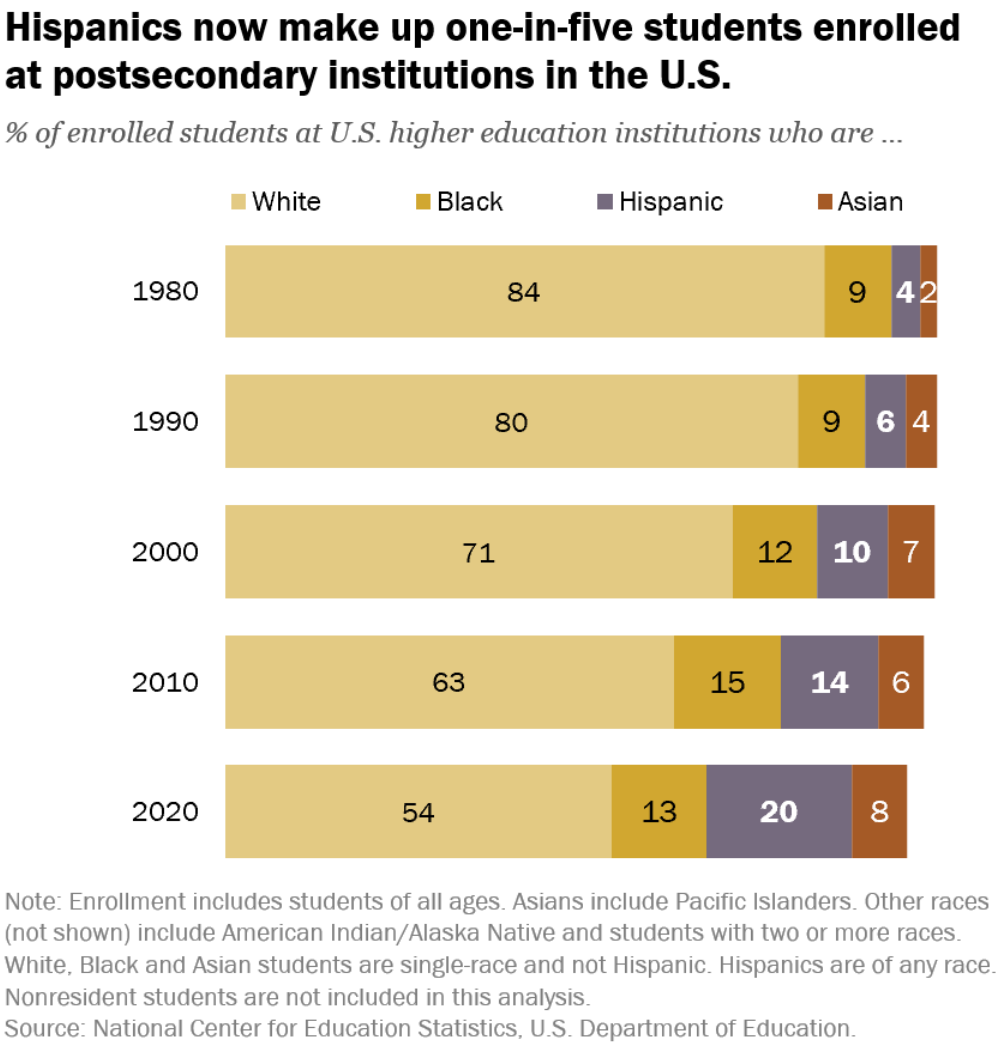


Figure 3. *Trend analysis of the percentage of enrolled students at U.S. higher education institutions by race (Mora, 2022).*

**Research Questions**

This investigation has one primary research question: What is the organizational behavior of HSI university presidents during critical incidents? A critical incident analysis offers deep insights into the organizational behavior of university presidents, including but not limited to (a) identifying key behaviors and decisions, (b) understanding responses to crises, and (c) highlighting leadership competencies. The inherently reflective process of a

critical incident analysis can also further our understanding of how similar situations can be managed more effectively in the future, which contributes to organizational improvement efforts.

## Significance of the Study

The research question listed above offers the potential for rich insights by examining organizational behavior across multiple incidents. This study is a significant contribution to our conceptualizations around the perspectives and actions of HSI university leaders. It also builds on our knowledge of diverse institutions which are on the forefront of serving historically marginalized populations, such as Latino students. As described earlier, the education of Latinos is a deeply important societal issue. Latinos are a fast growing population, and their share of enrolled college students is substantial (Hanson, 2022; Mora, 2022). Latinos already represent the largest non-White racial/ethnic group in America (Fry, 2011). But our colleges and universities were built for White students, and while student bodies may look more diverse, they are still taught and led by mostly White faculty and administrators (NCES, 2022; CUPA-HR, 2022). This research provides leaders with tools, ways of thinking and approaches to leadership that can be used in the pursuit of desired organizational outcomes. It also showcases effective (or ineffective) approaches to university leadership to facilitate learning and improvement.

## Definition of Terms

### *University Presidents*

Academic leaders of higher education institutions, sometimes referred to as Chancellor or Chief Executive. This role involves setting strategic direction, overseeing academic programs, managing financial resources, engaging with internal and external

stakeholders, and ensuring the university fulfills its mission (Birnbaum, 1992). The president works closely with various constituencies, including faculty, students, staff, trustees, and the local community, to achieve campus goals and address challenges.

### *Hispanic Serving Institutions*

A designation granted by the federal government to eligible public or private non-profit institutions of higher education that have at least 25 percent Latino undergraduate student enrollment "at the end of the award year preceding the date of application" (HACU, 2022). These funding opportunities, through the Department of Education, support academic programs, infrastructure, faculty development, and student services aimed at increasing the recruitment, retention, and graduation rates of Hispanic students and other underserved populations.

### *Organizational Behavior*

A term used to describe the "daily patterns of functioning and decision-making within an organization" (Berger & Milem, 2000, pg. 274). Studies of organizational behavior investigate how individuals and groups act and structures operate within organizations, for the purpose of applying such knowledge towards improving organizational effectiveness.

### *Organizational Culture*

Refers to deeply embedded "shared values, assumptions, beliefs or ideologies of the members" of an organization (Peterson & Spencer, 1990, pg. 7). Organizational culture can guide the behavior of individuals within an organization, shaping decisions, actions, and how the organization responds to challenges and opportunities.

## Organization of the Study

This introductory chapter of the dissertation is followed by five additional chapters. Chapter 2 provides a literature review that contextualizes research on higher education organizations and leaders, the critical incident technique and HSIs. The chapter also focuses on the conceptual frameworks that undergird this study: Berger and Milem's (2000) multidimensional model and classification of organizational behavior and Bensimon, Birnbaum, and Neumann's (1989) classification of academic organizational frames. Chapter 3, provides an overview of the methodological details of the study, including (a) procedures, (b) site selection, (c) participant selection, (d) ethical considerations and research positionality, (e) data analysis, (f) instruments and (g) validity and reliability. Chapter 4 consists of descriptive cases for each of the 12 participants, including aspects of their personal and professional background prior to the presidency, details of the critical incidents discussed and how they managed through them as well as a summary and analysis of their leadership during those incidents. That chapter also offers an overview of the across-case results and analysis and the leaders' perspectives on the relationship between the HSI status and critical incidents discussed. Chapter 5 provides a review of the results, including an overview of the utilization of dimensions of organizational behavior during incidents, as well as an examination of the effects of institutional type, source of the incident, and years as a president, ending with the key assertions of the study. Chapter 6 concludes the dissertation with a discussion of the findings, their connection to literature and practice, and recommendations for future investigations.

# Chapter 2

# Literature Review and Conceptual Frameworks

This literature review covers three main areas. First, it examines multidimensional frameworks for higher education organizational theory and leadership to provide a basis for comparative analysis. Second, it details the Critical Incident Technique (CIT) to establish the methodological foundation. Third, it presents an overview of literature on Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs) to give essential background information on the characteristics, challenges, and contexts of these institutions. By covering these three areas, the literature review sets the stage for a nuanced analysis of leadership within HSIs.

## Higher Education Organizational Theory and Leadership

Bensimon, Birnbaum & Neumann (1989) suggest a five dimensional framework developed through the Institutional Leadership Project (ILP): (a) the university as bureaucracy, (b) the university as collegium, (c) the university as a political system, (d) the university as organized anarchy and (e) the university as a cybernetic system. Berger and Milem (2000) also suggest a five dimensional framework for understanding organizational behavior as seen in Table 1 below. The contents of each organizational framework pull from several foundational theoretical perspectives in organization and higher education (Bensimon, 1989; Birnbaum, 1992; Bolman & Deal, 1991; Morgan, 2006; Letizia, 2014).

**Table 1**

*Berger and Milem's (2000) overview of multidimensional models and classifications of theories of organizational behavior*

| Study | Bureaucratic | Collegial | Political | Symbolic | Systemic |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Astin & Scherrei (1980) | Hierarchical & Task-Oriented | Humanistic | Insecure | | Entrepreneurial |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Baldridge (1971) | Bureaucratic | Collegial | Political | | |
| Birnbaum (1988) | Bureaucratic | Collegial | Political | Anarchical | Cybernetic |
| Bolman & Deal (1992) | Structural | Human Resource | Political | Symbolic | |
| Bush (2006) | Formal | Collegial | Political | Cultural & Ambiguity & Subjective | |
| Cameron & Ettington (1988) | Bureaucratic | Clan | | | Adhocracy & Market |
| Kuh (2003) | Rational | Collegial | Organized Anarchy & Political | Culture | Learning Organization |
| Morgan (2006) | Machine | Psychic Prison & Instrument of Domination | Politics | Culture | Organism & Flux and Transformation |
| Peterson & Dill (1997) | Bureaucratic | Collegial | Political Conglomerate | Cultural & Organized Anarchy | Network |
| Perrow (1986) | Bureaucratic & Managerial & Neo-Weberian | Human Relations | Political | | Institutional & Environment |
| Quinn & Rohrbaugh (1981) | Rational & Firm | Clan | | | Adhocracy |
| Shafritz & Ott (1991) | Classical & Neoclassical & Structural | Human Resource | Political | Cultural | Systems Market |

### *The University as Bureaucracy and the Bureaucratic Dimension*

**“**Organizations exist primarily to accomplish established rational goals and objectives”

(Berger & Milem, 2000, pg. 274)

In the structural frame, bureaucratic leaders have final authority over a centralized system (Bolman & Deal, 1991). Presidents with a bureaucratic frame are likely to emphasize their role in making decisions, getting results, and establishing well-defined systems of management (Bensimon, 1989). The idea of a heroic leader aligns with findings of presidents perceiving themselves to be not only more effective than their predecessors, but also responsible for making major improvements to the university (Birnbaum, Bensimon, & Neumann, 1989). Like other types of organizations, colleges and universities have elements of bureaucracy. Approaches often associated with the bureaucratic dimension include decisiveness, a results-focused orientation, objective-oriented managing, and rationality in problem-solving. However, in higher education, the concept of bureaucracy may have negative connotations because a bureaucratic president is likely to be perceived as "hierarchical and authoritarian, if not autocratic" (Birnbaum, 1989b, pg. 13). Bureaucracies often have difficulty in adapting to changing environments, tend to produce arbitrary or inflexible processes, and can have a dehumanizing impact on employees (Morgan, 2006). While foundational, the purely structural approach to organizational behavior is, in some respects, obsolete–though university leaders do have some level of bureaucratic authority. Presidents who view the university as a bureaucracy may be more likely to prevail in private, non-selective, liberal arts or community college institutions, in part, due to the absence of strong faculty senates. Strengths of the university as a bureaucracy are the clear hierarchy and structure, standardization of procedures, efficiency, and accountability.

### *The University as Collegium and the Collegial Dimension*

"Organizations exist to serve human needs and…organizations and people need each other"

(Berger & Milem, 2000, pg. 274)

A community of equals, or a collegium, is a way to exemplify a human-centered organizational orientation. The collegium model focuses on shared governance, consensus-building, and the involvement of faculty members, administrators, and other stakeholders in shaping the university's direction and operations (Bensimon, Birnbaum, & Neumann; 1989; Birnbaum, 1989b; Tierney, 2008). Additionally, Birnbaum (1988) argued that three major components compose a collegial university: (a) the right to participate in campus affairs, (b) a congenial, mutually supportive community, and (c) the equal and fair treatment of campus constituents. In a collegium, decision-making authority is distributed among various stakeholders, including faculty members, administrators, and students, with each group having a say in shaping institutional policies and practices. This builds a sense of ownership and responsibility among campus constituents. The collegium values mutual respect, trust, and open dialogue among its members. Instead of top-down directives, this model encourages the development of consensus through open discussion, negotiation, and compromise. Ideally, this approach leads to more inclusive and thoughtful decision-making processes. Lastly, the collegium model also supports academic freedom, which allows scholars to pursue their research interests and engage in intellectual debates without interference or censorship.

Presidents who use a collegial frame seek out democratic decision-making processes and prioritize meeting people’s needs and development (Bensimon, 1989). A collegium produces leaders from its own ranks, to serve the interests of the group as a “first among equals.” There is an expectation that university presidents will be open to persuasion and influence as they navigate decision-making situations. A collegial leader feels a sense of duty because they are seen by others as a representation of the group's achievements and

aspirations. Less concerned with hierarchical relationships, the president who perceives the university as a collegium emphasizes participation in institutional decision-making. Therefore, the collegial president's job is not to control or to direct, but to facilitate and encourage. Many presidents may view themselves as collegial, but some studies have shown other members of the institution did not concur (Bensimon, 1989). The collegium is criticized because consensus naturally obscures diverse perspectives, abilities, and behaviors (Tierney & Bensimon, 1996). Additionally, the collegium assumes "functional unity" but in reality, while there may be moments of unity across an organization, there are also times of conflict and strife (Morgan, 2006). Therefore, consensus could be either "fiction, divisional, or both" (Bensimon, Birnbaum, & Neumann, 1989, pg. 55). The collegium is also criticized as being inefficient, labor intensive, and time consuming. But it is not without merit. A human-focus aligns with typically espoused values of higher education, such as collaborative decision-making, academic freedom, a sense of community and constituent empowerment.

### *The University as Political System and the Political Dimension*

"Colleges and universities may reflect the political dimension more than any of the other dimensions"

(Berger & Milem, 2000, pg. 287)

Politics is a method for organizing and guiding people who have diverse and sometimes conflicting interests (Morgan, 2006). Unfortunately, for many, politics in name and content has negative connotations. This prevents us from viewing political activity as an essential aspect of organizational life and not as dysfunctional. In a political system, the most persistent members make decisions, typically in smaller group settings. In this

environment, ever-changing coalitions, and interest groups each pursue their respective agenda under a reality of resource scarcity (Berger & Milem, 2000). As resource scarcity increases, so does conflict. In this perspective, university leaders operate as mediators and policymakers (Bensimon, Birnbaum, & Neumann, 1989). The president must actively and constantly negotiate between shifting blocs of power (Bensimon, 1989). The university as a political system offers the ripest opportunity for members of campus to build support from their campus constituents around mutually valued objectives. Effective political strategies may include: (a) giving and sharing credit, (b) patience, (c) perseverance, and (d) fairness (Bensimon, Birnbaum, & Neumann, 1989). Some studies have shown that a combination of political and bureaucratic-focused leadership may be particularly effective during times of institutional crisis due to the need for strategic decision-making, efficiency, stake-holder engagement, and resource allocation.

The political metaphor encourages us to see how all organized activity is interest-based (Morgan, 2006). This perspective centers the relationship between power and organization. Politics dispel the myth that organizations operate purely rationally. Organizational goals or objectives may be rational for some member's interests but not for others. The political metaphor also suggests organizations are not integrated systems but made up of diverse interests which may lead to tension and strain. Many organizations operate as loosely coupled systems, where semi-autonomous components seek independence while adhering to the organization's overall framework (Weick, 1976). The tensions between the interests of the organization and its members inevitably incentivize individual political activity.

Conversely, a hyper-political perspective could lead to further politicization of the organization wherein an arms race for political activity could occur (Morgan, 2006). Politicization could also foster cynicism and suspicion. Uniquely, a strength of this metaphor is the ability to see politics anywhere–but that may also be the most significant limitation. Rather than use the perspective to gain new organizational insights there may be a tendency for the metaphor to devolve into a tool of self-interest. A final limitation is the overstatement of the power of the individual in the face of existing structures that determine what becomes political and how politics occur. In sum, the university as a political system is a complex and dynamic environment, shaped by a variety of stakeholders, power dynamics, and cultural factors (Berger & Milem, 2000).

### *The University as Organized Anarchy and the Symbolic Dimension*

> "Faced with uncertainty and ambiguity, human beings create symbols to resolve confusion, increase predictability, and provide direction."
>
> (Berger & Milem, 2000, pg. 290)

A university described as an "organized anarchy" refers to a complex, loosely structured environment where decision-making and governance are often characterized by ambiguity, competing interests, and shifting goals (Cohen et al., 1972; Cohen & March, 1974; Bensimon, Birnbaum, & Neumann, 1989). An organized anarchy is conceptually aligned with Berger and Milem's (2000) symbolic dimension. Under this perspective, universities are viewed as organizations with diverse stakeholders, such as faculty, students, administrators, and external entities, each having their own priorities and objectives. The concept of organized anarchy is often associated with the "garbage can model" of decision-making, introduced by Cohen, March and Olsen (1972). This model suggests that in

organizations, decisions are made through a fluid and chaotic process, where problems, solutions, decision-makers, and opportunities for choice flow in and out of a metaphorical "garbage can".

The defining features of an organized anarchy are (a) ambiguity in goals, (b) unclear decision-making processes, (c) fluid participation and (d) competing interests (Cohen & March, 1974; Bensimon, Birnbaum, & Neumann, 1989; Berger & Milem, 2000). First, universities often have multiple, sometimes conflicting, or ambiguous goals, such as delivering high-quality education, conducting groundbreaking research, and contributing to the community. Additionally, due to the diverse range of stakeholders and decentralized nature of universities, decision-making processes can be complex, involving various committees, departments, and individuals. Further, participation in decision-making may vary depending on individuals' interests, expertise, and availability, leading to inconsistent involvement in various processes. And lastly, the interests of faculty, students, administrators, and external stakeholders may not always align, causing tensions and conflicts in decision-making and resource allocation.

The university as organized anarchy views university presidents as facilitators of an ongoing process (Bensimon, Birnbaum, & Neumann, 1989). Robert Birnbaum (1989b; 1992) posits academic leadership has an absence of “clear indicators” of effective performance. Under this assumption, followers tend to believe leaders cause events. The lack of clear indicators also asserts that leaders themselves are subject to cognitive bias (such as overestimating their effectiveness), which has the potential to lead to unnecessary and predictable errors. Cohen and March (1974) developed eight tactical rules to be used by presidents in an organized anarchy: (a) spend time, (b) persist, (c) exchange status for

substance, (d) facilitate the opposition's participation, (e) overload the system, (f) provide garbage cans, (g) manage unobtrusively, and (h) interpret history. Despite the seemingly chaotic nature of organized anarchy, universities (and their leaders) typically still find ways to function effectively and adapt to changing circumstances, benefiting from both the flexibility and innovation that emerges in these environments.

### *The University as Cybernetic System and the Systemic Dimension*

> "Universities can be aptly described as open systems with interacting components, the ability to import people, ideas, and resources through permeable organizational boundaries and transform them into education and scholarly outputs"
>
> (Berger & Milem, 2000, pg. 293)

The cybernetic approach is a source of considerable debate. For some, like Robert Birnbaum, the cybernetic frame is a tool to cohesively bind the other four perspectives: bureaucratic, collegial, symbolic, and political (Birnbaum, 1988,1989a, 1992). For others, it is either a fifth frame or not a frame at all (Berger & Milem, 2000). Bolman and Deal (1991), infamous for their ubiquitous and highly palatable (though perhaps over-simplified) four frames of organization, have criticized Robert Birnbaum for attempting to accomplish too much with the cybernetic frame of analysis. However, they fail to recognize how their own typology of organizational frames neglects environmental inputs. Berger and Milem (2000) argue the middle with their systemic dimension and posit that Birnbaum asks too much of his cybernetic frame, and in doing so underemphasizes the importance of introducing environmental effects to the conversation.

Describing a university as a cybernetic system means viewing it as a self-regulating organization that constantly adjusts and adapts to its environment to achieve its goals

(Birnbaum, 1989b, 1989c). Cybernetics has to do with control and communication processes in living organisms, machines, and organizations, with a focus on feedback loops, information flows, and adaptive behaviors. Feedback loops refer to how universities continuously collect data and feedback from various sources, such as student evaluations, research output, and external assessments, to monitor their performance and make necessary adjustments. A cybernetic university adapts and evolves based on feedback and changing conditions, learning from its experiences, and modifying its strategies and processes accordingly. Efficient communication and information flow between various departments, faculties, and stakeholders are essential for a cybernetic university to maintain its self-regulating capabilities and coordinate its actions effectively. The university employs various control mechanisms, such as policies, procedures, and performance indicators, to ensure that its resources are allocated and utilized effectively to achieve its goals.

Under the cohesive perspective of the cybernetic model (Birnbaum, 1988, 1989c, 1992), universities are controlled by negative feedback loops established by their bureaucratic structures and collegial social systems. These feedback loops are determined by the political and symbolic elements of the institution. A cybernetic university is constantly assessing its performance and effectiveness through various “monitors”. Typically, if a monitor is alerted, it will initiate a response to the problem. In an organization as complex as a university, cybernetic institutions may run themselves. That does not mean this metaphor views presidents as ineffective, only that their effectiveness depends on how well they align their behavior with cybernetic functioning of their organization (Birnbaum, 1988). The principles of cybernetic administration attempt to join higher education organizational and leadership theories through suggesting leaders: (a) “complicate” themselves, (b) become

more sensitive to the possibility of unanticipated outcomes, (c) increase reliance on intuition, (d) recognize decision-making is not an analytical, sequential process, (e) understand the sources of common cognitive errors, (f) encourage dissent, (g) select personnel who emphasize different values, (h) be certain that data are collected, (i) practice openness, (j) know and listen to their followers, and (k) be good bureaucrats (Birnbaum, 1989c). Viewing a university as a cybernetic system emphasizes its ability to maintain stability and achieve desired outcomes through continuous learning, adaptation, and self-regulation. This perspective can help university administrators and stakeholders better understand and manage the complex, dynamic nature of higher education institutions. However, a cybernetic system tends to overemphasize quantitative data (at the expense of qualitative data), oversimplifies human complexity, and increases bureaucracy (Morgan, 2006).

**The Critical Incident Technique**

The Critical Incident Technique (CIT), since its introduction by Flanagan (1954), has been a common qualitative research tool in understanding human behavior and enhancing problem-solving strategies in various fields. Flanagan (1954) initially described CIT as a method for collecting direct observations of human behavior to aid in problem-solving and the development of psychological principles. Originating from studies in the Aviation Psychology Program of the Army Air Forces during World War II, CIT was instrumental in identifying effective combat leadership and addressing pilot disorientation through the systematic collection and analysis of critical incidents. This method emphasized flexibility in data collection, a trait that allowed it to be adapted across different fields and situations (Flanagan, 1954).

Woolsey (1986) further validated CIT's reliability and validity in generating comprehensive descriptions of content domains, emphasizing the method's focus on incidents that significantly impact outcomes. Woolsey, along with Johnson and Fauske (2000), outlined the five-step process integral to conducting a CIT study, which includes (a) determining the study's aim, (b) setting criteria for information collection, (c) data gathering, (d) thematic analysis, and (e) reporting findings. This process underscores CIT's utility in exploratory research and theory development. However, the flexibility of CIT, while one of its strengths, has also led to an increase in the number of approaches, potentially complicating its application and interpretation (Butterfield et al., 2005). Despite this, Bott and Tourish (2016) argue for CIT's exceptional capacity for generating rich data that can illuminate various organizational phenomena, advocating for its underutilized potential in organization and management research.

The accuracy of CIT findings often hinges on the incidents reported, with detailed and clear accounts considered more reliable (Flanagan, 1954; Woolsey, 1986; Butterfield et al., 2005). Bott and Tourish (2016) highlighted how CIT could validate transformational leadership theory while also revealing its limitations, showcasing the method's ability to offer "thick descriptions" conducive to theory building. CIT's adaptability allows researchers to refine and tailor the technique to specific research needs (Bott & Tourish, 2016), with preconceptions playing a critical role in data analysis by helping researchers manage the data's volume (Bott & Tourish, 2016). Theoretical agreement, a process of scrutinizing themes against theoretical frameworks, further enhances CIT's robustness as a research tool (Butterfield et al., 2005; Bott & Tourish, 2016). In conclusion, the critical incident technique stands as a powerful method for exploratory research and theory development, offering

detailed insights into human behavior across various contexts. Its strengths lie in its flexibility, the depth of data it can generate, and its capacity for theoretical alignment, making it an invaluable tool in organizational studies.

## Literature on Hispanic Serving Institutions

HSIs, recognized for enrolling a significant percentage of Latino students, face the challenge of not just enrolling but also serving their student populations in ways that foster academic success, cultural inclusion, and equitable outcomes. Contreras and Contreras (2015) provided a critique, noting that despite HSIs in California enabling equitable rates of persistence and 30-unit completion among Latino students compared to their white counterparts, these institutions lag in transfer and graduation rates for Latino students. This discrepancy raises questions about the effectiveness of HSIs in serving their intended demographics. In contrast, advanced statistical models by Flores and Park (2013) and Rodríguez and Calderón Galdeano (2015) suggested that when controlling for institutional characteristics like selectivity, disparities in graduation outcomes between HSIs and non-HSIs for Latino students diminish, which indicates other factors are at play beyond the institutional designation itself.

Further exploring the dynamics within HSIs, Cuellar (2014) found an increase in academic self-concept among Latino students over four years, suggesting that HSIs may positive added value to aspects of student self-efficacy and identity. Garcia (2017a, 2019) expanded on this by introducing a typology of organizational identities within HSIs, ranging from “Latinx-enrolling” to “Latinx-serving”, articulating a range of how institutions engage with and support their Latino student populations beyond just enrollment. This typology drives home the need for HSIs to actively foster a culture that not only enhances the

educational experiences of Latino students but also produces equitable outcomes. The concept of servingness was further examined by Garcia and Ramirez (2018) and Petrov and Garcia (2021), who argued for the importance of institutional agents and leadership in actively challenging oppressive structures and fostering environments that empower Latino students. This includes leveraging federal grants and organizational policies to create transformational change regarding racial equity.

Recent research, such as that by Lujan, McNaughtan, and Williams (2024) and Ryan Rodriguez (2023), has continued to explore servingness, the variation in institutional intentionality and the ongoing challenge of truly centering Latino student experiences. Vargas and Villa-Palomino (2019) critique the frequent colorblind approaches in HSI grant proposals and program implementations, which often overlook the specific needs of Latino students, which suggests a gap exists between the federal designation of HSIs and the way servingness is operationalized on the ground. This body of work speaks to the complexity of HSIs' important role in higher education. While there is evidence of positive impacts on Latino students' academic self-concept and some measures of academic success, significant work remains in ensuring that HSIs not only enroll but also genuinely serve Latino students in a way that actually reflects an understanding of their needs and aspirations (Cuellar & Johnson-Ahorlu, 2023). The literature seems to call for a reimagined approach to leadership and organizational culture within HSIs, one that is proactive, culturally responsive, and committed to dismantling the barriers to success for historically marginalized populations within the wide-ranging variety of institutions with the HSI designation.

**Summary**

This literature review began with an explanation of multidimensional frameworks for understanding higher education organizational theory and leadership. Bensimon, Birnbaum, and Neumann (1989) proposed a five-dimensional framework developed through the Institutional Leadership Project (ILP), which included perspectives of the university as bureaucracy, collegium, political system, organized anarchy, and a cybernetic system. This framework is complemented by Berger and Milem (2000), who also presented a five-dimensional framework for comprehending organizational behavior, emphasizing the structural, collegial, political, symbolic, and systemic dimensions. These frameworks drew from foundational theories in organizational and higher education studies, and they offer an overview of the complexity in managing and leading universities and colleges.

The review then transitioned to detailing the Critical Incident Technique (CIT), established by Flanagan (1954), as a methodological cornerstone for understanding organizational behavior and enhancing problem-solving strategies. CIT is recognized for its flexibility and depth in data collection, analysis, and reporting, making it an invaluable tool in exploratory research and theory development within organizational studies. This technique emphasizes the significance of detailed and clear accounts of incidents, facilitating the generation of rich data that explain organizational phenomena and supports theory validation and refinement.

Finally, there was an overview of literature on HSIs, highlighting the characteristics, challenges, and contexts of these institutions in serving their Latino student populations. It discusses the critique by Contreras and Contreras (2015) on the disparities in academic outcomes within HSIs and contrasts it with findings by Flores and Park (2013, 2015) and Rodríguez and Calderón Galdeano (2015), which suggest institutional characteristics play a

critical role in organizational outcomes. Further, it explored the work of Cuellar (2014) and Garcia (2017b, 2018) on the positive impacts of HSIs on Latino students' academic self-concept and the typology of organizational identities within HSIs. This section ended in discussing the importance of institutional agents and leadership in creating environments that empower Latino students and address racial equity, as argued by Garcia and Ramirez (2018) and Petrov and Garcia (2021). By examining these three areas, the literature review sets the stage for a nuanced analysis of leadership within HSIs.

# Chapter 3

# Methodology

## Procedures

The research design for this study is a multiple embedded case study. Embedded case studies are case studies with more than one sub-unit of analysis, while multiple case studies include two or more cases investigating the same phenomenon (Yin, 2018). This multiple case study consists of two rounds of interviews with HSI university presidents. Criteria for site and participation selection is described in the following sections. After potential sites and participants were selected, 22 presidents were contacted and sent an invitation letter (Appendix A) to secure 12 participants. The presidents then notified the researcher when they were available for the two interviews. If the invited participant declined the invitation or never responded, then new participants were identified and selected based on the composition of the confirmed presidents at that time. 11 of 12 presidents had the first round interview conducted in person at their home university. However, each of the second round interviews took place virtually or by telephone. Prior to

the interviews, each president completed an informed consent form and agreed to be audio-recorded (Appendix B).

Both rounds of interviews with the presidents followed an in-depth semi-structured interview protocol (Appendix C). A semi-structured approach was selected to allow for a blend of flexibility and structure (Spradley, 1979; Leech, 2002). The first interview covered two main areas: 1) the presidents' personal background and pathway to the presidency (Goodson, 2001; Turner, 2007; Tierney, 2013; Castro, 2018; Castro, 2022) and 2) the process the presidents used in familiarizing themselves with their campus culture (Tierney, 1988). This interview was to gain important contextual information on that president as well as to gather preliminary information on critical incidents to be discussed. The second interview focused on their organizational behavior during critical incidents, using the critical-incident technique (CIT). CIT is a qualitative research tool that provides insight into various human behaviors and activities (Flanagan, 1954; Woolsey, 1986; Johnson & Fauske, 2000). It involves seeking instances of specific behaviors and events and discussing their significance with participants. Based on actual behavior, CIT facilitates critical thinking among researchers and participants as they analyze and interpret previous actions.

These interviews all took place on separate days so that participants had ample time to reflect and consider quality examples for the second interview. Both interviews were digitally recorded. After they were completed, the interviews were transcribed using Otter.ai software. The transcriptions were then analyzed through NVIVO for themes using both inductive and deductive codes (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006; Saldaña, 2021). The a priori codes (see Appendix D) for the first interview were drawn from previous research on presidential pathways and presidential cultural familiarization (Tierney, 1988; Castro, 2018;

Castro, 2022). The a priori codes for the second interview drew from Berger and Milem's (2000) multidimensional model and classification of theories of organizational behavior and related literature on organizational theory. A codebook was developed and included operational definitions for each of the a priori codes. Taking a thematic analysis approach, the first cycle of coding utilized the a priori codes, refined them and incorporated emergent codes (Braun & Clarke, 2012; Saldaña, 2021). For example, the a priori codes for political organizational behavior were 'influence', 'conflict', 'competition', 'negotiation', 'coalitions', 'networking', 'allocation of resources', 'rewards' and 'exchange'. After the first cycle of coding the codes for 'conflict' and 'competition' were combined and a new subcode, 'factions', was created. Also, the code for 'networking' turned into a subcode for 'coalitions', the code for 'rewards' was removed, and a new code, 'reputation', was created. The second cycle of coding further refined the codebook, including the combination or removal of irrelevant a priori and emergent codes. For example, 'conflict and competition' and 'influence' emerged as the most salient aspects of political organizational behavior, followed by 'coalitions', 'allocation of resources' and 'negotiation'. Upon the completion of the coding process, case descriptions were developed for each of the 12 presidents (Yin, 2018). The cases covered three periods: prior to the presidency, the early presidency, and critical incidents during the presidency. Finally, themes and patterns of the utilization of bureaucratic, collegial, political, symbolic, and systemic dimensions across the critical incidents were synthesized into a final analysis of HSI presidential organizational behavior.

**Site Selection**

The presidents were drawn from sites based on the following considerations. First, they had to preside over a federally recognized HSI. Second, they had to have presided over

their institution at least 3 years prior to the date of the first interview. This was to ensure the participants had enough time to familiarize themselves with the campus culture, as well as build up a robust menu of critical incidents to discuss. California was selected primarily due to feasibility and because it houses just under 30% of all HSIs in the country. It also tends to be more diverse than other states, which indicates that its institutions could serve as a bellwether on best practices in student support for other rapidly diversifying states. Further, this states strong commitment to academic quality is accompanied by a purportedly deep-seated commitment to diversity and educational equity. Higher education in California has parallels to many other major American colleges and universities as well, therefore allowing the findings to be more applicable to a wider range of schools than a random sampling of institutions. Its multi-tiered system of public higher education was the model for public higher education systems.

**Participant/Case Selection**

The study consists of twelve separate cases. They were selected from a population of 149 HSIs in California. Purposive sampling was used for case selection. Purposive sampling, also referred to as judgment sampling, is the process of "selecting a sample that is believed to be representative of a given population" (Gay et al., 2009, p. 134). In the context of this study, that meant a prioritization of presidents at full HSIs, with efforts to achieve some level of balance in the gender, racial/ethnic identity, institutional type, geographical region, time in the role and campus size of the participants. 12 California HSIs were selected. However, considering not every institution or leader accepted the invite when an invitation was declined then additional HSIs were strategically selected until exhaustion. 22 invitations were extended in total before securing the desired number of participants.

**Participant Description**

There are 12 total participants included in this study (see Table 2 below). Five of the 12 participants are female and 7 are male. Six of the participants are people of color, including 3 Latino presidents, 2 Asian presidents and 1 Black president. The other six participants are White. Seven of the presidents have over five years' experience as a college or university president and five presidents have less than five years of experience. Eight of the institutions represented are public, including six 2-year colleges and two 4-year universities. Four of the institutions represented are 4-year private universities. Five of those institutions enroll less than 5,000 students, while seven of them enroll over 5,000 students. Geographically, three of the institutions represented reside in the North part of the state, three reside in the Central part of the state, and six reside in the Southern part of the state. Six of the institutions enroll over 50% Latino students, and the other six institutions enroll between 25% and 50% Latino students.

**Table 2**

*Participant Information*

| Leader | Institution | Institutional Type | Experience | Race/ Ethnicity | Gender |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| James Smith | Hopeville CC | 2-year public | < 5 years | Black | Male |
| Carmen Reyes | Valley Gateway College | 2-year public | < 5 years | Latina | Female |
| Mellie Kimperton | Meadow Ridge College | 2-year public | > 5 years | Asian | Female |
| Luis Mendoza | Cedar Trails CC | 2-year public | < 5 years | Latino | Male |
| Ryan Easton | Blue Sky College | 2-year public | > 5 years | White | Male |
| Nico Tolentino | Panorama College | 2-year public | < 5 years | Asian | Male |
| Clara Pennington | Riverview University | 4-year private | < 5 years | White | Female |
| Tessa Norwood | Oakleaf University | 4-year private | > 5 years | White | Female |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Catherine Dale | Trinity Heights University | 4-year private | > 5 years | White | Female |
| Patrick Lawson | Faithway University | 4-year private | > 5 years | White | Male |
| Antonio Vega | Sunstone University | 4-year public | > 5 years | Latino | Male |
| Scott Winter | Golden Grove University | 4-year public | > 5 years | White | Male |

**Research Positionality and Ethical Considerations**

I am a Portuguese Chicano born and raised in California. My parents are from a small, diverse, rural Central Valley town with historically limited access to higher education. Most of my grandparents and great-grandparents also lived in that region, with working-class jobs that ranged from the dairy farm to the hair salon. I witnessed the transformative power of higher education as my father, the first in our family to earn a graduate degree, brought my family out of poverty through his determination, perseverance, and his success as an administrator in public higher education. Throughout my childhood and adolescence, I was exposed to his professional environments that spanned across several institutions in California. I directly and indirectly benefited from the sacrifices of my parents and grandparents, which resulted in key personal, academic, and professional opportunities that set the foundation for my own early career success. For several years I worked as an educational administrator and student services professional before pursuing a doctorate. Eventually, my father became a university president and I bore witness to his experiences as the first Chicano leader of his institution and, ultimately, the first Chicano leader of the largest public university system in the country, as well as the influence his bold leadership had on student success during his tenure. These unique perspectives across my life provided me with key insights into the role of a university leader and the many important positions that precede it. I also gained a deep understanding of the challenges that university

administrators face, especially for people of color. These experiences inform the way I view and value the university presidency, as well as my interest in learning more on the subject.

This study has minimal risks. However, because I am the son of a former public university president and system leader, one ethical issue to manage is the assumption that my analysis and findings will be biased according to my father's relationship or experiences with selected participants. To mitigate this, I interpreted the data through the lenses of established conceptual frameworks. Further, presidents are typically reluctant to have findings linked to their name and careers, therefore all presidents' identities and the names of their institutions have been masked in this study. Lastly, the data collected is contained and managed on a device with password protection. Only myself and my dissertation chair and faculty advisor, Dr. Jeffrey Milem, has access to this data.

**Data Analysis**

The interviews were transcribed verbatim. Results from both presidential interviews were analyzed through a reading of the transcripts for pertinent themes, and coded accordingly (Saldaña, 2021). NVIVO was utilized to facilitate data categorization (Hilal & Alabri, 2013). I used the Critical Incident Technique to categorize incidents based on their characteristics, like the types of organizational behavior utilized, their impact on the university, the president's response, and the outcome. The objective of analysis of the critical incidents is to "provide a detailed, comprehensive and valid description of the activity studied" (Woolsey, 1986, pg. 248). Data analysis also included creating visual representations of the data to highlight the relationships and patterns found. Credibility checks were conducted to ensure the validity and reliability of the results, including member checking and expert review (Butterfield et al., 2005). Finally, the findings were interpreted

in the context of existing literature and the research question. Each critical incident was examined to contemplate why the incidents happened, what their impacts were, how they were addressed, and the implications for university leadership, HSIs and Latino students.

**Summary**

This study was designed to gain an immersive perspective on HSI university presidents' organizational behavior through a deep dive into their handling situations on the job. This critical incident analysis of university presidents, particularly those leading HSIs, offers valuable insights and has numerous implications. University presidents can play a crucial role in the success and overall direction of the institution they serve. This study helps to understand the unique challenges they face, particularly in HSIs where they may be dealing with a unique set of socio-economic, cultural, and educational issues. The analysis also points to areas in which policy reform might be needed. For example, if critical incidents are frequently tied to financial or enrollment crises, new policies could be developed to better manage these aspects. Further, this study contributes to developing effective crisis management strategies by helping presidents and their teams to be better prepared for potential future crises. Since HSIs serve high numbers of Hispanic and often low-income students, understanding how university presidents manage critical incidents can inform strategies that contribute to student success, such as managing budget cuts without reducing student services or finding new ways to support student engagement. HSIs are also central to promoting diversity and inclusion in higher education. The findings of this investigation may assist educators in managing incidents related to racial or ethnic tensions. Lastly, revealing the areas where critical incidents most commonly occur, the analysis helps to guide strategic planning to help HSIs better manage resources and align their operations

with their mission. A critical incident analysis of university presidents at HSIs has significant value not just for these institutions, but for the broader field of higher education, due to its ability to generate focused, rich, and contextually grounded data that can provide insights into specific events or actions. It offers practical applications for improvement, supports learning and development, and contributes to theory (Flanagan, 1954; Woolsey, 1986).

# Chapter 4

## Cases and Results

### Case 1: President James Smith, Hopeville Community College

> "Remember that you're not in the education business, you're in the people business, those relationships are invaluable. And you have to make sure that you're trying to leverage relationships as much as possible. It's not so much about a dictatorship…you want to inspire and galvanize the troops." (Smith, 2023)

#### *Pathway to Presidency*

**Family Background and Education.** President Smith's pathway to the presidency is symbolized by perseverance, hard work, and education. Growing up in a working-class neighborhood in an urban Midwestern city, Smith's early life was framed by a spirit of hard work instilled by his parents. Despite facing the challenges of a family struggling to make ends meet, Smith vividly recalls the impactful lessons from his father, "I asked him, 'Dad, why are you never home for Christmas?' And his response was, 'we could celebrate Christmas any day, they pay me triple time at the job.'" This principle of prioritizing hard work over immediate gratification became a cornerstone of Smith's life philosophy.

Navigating his formative years in the inner city exposed Smith to the harsh realities and temptations of street life. Reflecting on this period, he admits, "I got myself wrapped up in that...made a lot of stupid mistakes." Yet, it was these very mistakes that Smith believes paved the way for his future. The transformative moment in Smith's life came with his service in the military, a period that instilled discipline and focus. This experience profoundly shaped his approach to education upon his return to civilian life. Smith's commitment to his studies was unwavering, "I was just [a]...straight A student, for the most part." His dedication did not go unnoticed, as he recounts an instance where his military discipline spilled over into the classroom when fellow students were being unruly, "I still had my Marine Corps hat on. And I just went off… like, 'I'm here to learn, please shut the hell up.'" This incident not only highlighted Smith's serious approach to his education but also his willingness to stand up for a conducive learning environment, earning him the respect of both peers and faculty. Despite the sacrifices and strains on his personal life, including challenges in his relationships, Smith viewed his work and educational pursuits as a form of community service.

**Mentors.** President Smith learned from several key figures who mentored or influenced his personal worldview and professional growth. Among these key individuals, Lieutenant McElroy stands out as a White man who unknowingly catalyzed Smith's pursuit of higher education and self-improvement through his demonstrated mediocrity. Smith reflected on this realization of potential beyond socio-economic and racial boundaries during his military service, noting, "I've been brainwashed my entire life thinking I was inadequate when, in fact, intelligence has no color...it's what you put in." The transition from military to academic life introduced Smith to another mentor, the Executive Vice President of

Enrollment Management, who imparted a crucial lesson on the dangers of being pigeonholed. He advised Smith, "Whatever you do, make sure you get involved in every single bucket within the institution," highlighting the importance of broadening one's perspective and skillset beyond a single domain.

Later in his career, figures like Miriam and Dr. Juarez recognized Smith's potential and progressively elevated him from Dean to Vice President, and eventually, upon Miriam's recommendation, to President. Smith's professional rise is emblematic of the power of mentorship and the impact of those who see potential where others might not. Dr. Corrine Graves also stands out for her rigorous approach to mentorship. Smith candidly recounts an instance where she critically evaluated his report, marking it with a red pen and providing blunt feedback on his communication skills. Initially perceived as overly harsh, this interaction was a turning point for Smith, who came to see it as invaluable guidance aimed at honing his potential. "She sees the potential...But she knows that these factors are going to get in the way of that potential," Smith realized. These mentors not only corrected and guided Smith but also instilled in him the importance of clear communication and the value of constructive criticism.

**Challenges, Obstacles and Complications.** Shortly after celebrating the joy of high school graduation, a moment President Smith's mother considered a monumental achievement, he found himself on the precipice of a major downfall. Smith recounted the sharp turn from triumph to despair: "right after high school...about three days later, I got arrested for selling drugs. So you're talking about an extreme high…to an extreme low." The fear of a potential lengthy prison sentence was a wake-up call for Smith, underlining the stark reality of his situation: "terrified, because I'm like, all but 150 pounds soaking wet. And the chance and

likelihood of me spending the rest of my life in jail was very frightening." However, a twist of fate and a moment of judicial leniency turned the tide in his favor. Smith's decision to enlist in the Marine Corps played a key role in the dismissal of his case. His recount of the court's decision reveals the profound relief and pivotal change in his life's direction: "the judge…said the case is dismissed...or discharged...they dropped the case...He's like, it's dropped…that's it."

Smith's personal life also posed significant challenges, particularly in navigating marital issues that tested his unrelenting commitment to educational leadership. The loss of his then-wife's mother and the subsequent blame placed upon him for not moving closer to her family in California highlighted the strains in their relationship. Smith described the emotional turmoil and the accusations that propelled a significant life decision: "she kind of blamed me to say, you know, you've been saying you're gonna move back…near my family...and you haven't even thought about [it], in fact, you're moving further away." Amidst professional advancements and personal endeavors, Smith's health also became a pressing concern. High blood pressure signaled the need for a lifestyle change, prompting him to reevaluate his priorities and career path. "My blood pressure was just…skyrocketing...I needed to slow down," he admitted. His ambitions were taking a physical toll, a realization which led to a strategic career shift, taking on a Dean role that offered a more manageable pace while allowing him to remain impactful in his field.

**Professional Development.** President Smith is a prolific participant in professional development, marked by an impressive array of training programs and educational experiences that have significantly contributed to his leadership and managerial skills. His journey began with the Management Institute, a selective training program launched by his

college to hone the abilities of its top emerging leaders. This initiative set the stage for a series of developmental opportunities that Smith eagerly embraced, including a comprehensive year-long management program at Midwestern private university. Notably, he also completed the Dale Carnegie course three times, each level offering deeper insights into effective communication and interpersonal skills. The Disney Institute enriched his understanding of customer service excellence, while a private Midwestern university provided advanced training in project management and exemplary leadership. Smith engaged with the Stephen Covey program on leadership, absorbing principles that would guide his professional conduct and decision-making. Another private for-profit Midwest university's Aspire program played a crucial role in broadening his knowledge of operations and financial management. Smith's description of himself as a "sponge for knowledge" aptly captures his proactive and enthusiastic participation in any learning opportunity, whether it demanded a weekend or an entire summer.

**Professional Roles and Inspirations.** President Smith credits the military, specifically his time in the Marine Corps, with expanding his worldview and instilling in him the belief that "intelligence has no color," a realization that fueled his determination to pursue higher education and leadership roles. In the military "you learn about being a manager because their mantra is, this person can be killed... you always want to make sure that you're positioning yourself to take over your boss and your boss's boss's job," Smith reflected. Soon after, Smith's administrative career began modestly in an admissions outreach department, where his leadership potential was quickly recognized, propelling him through ranks from supervisor to Director and eventually to overseeing multiple campuses as Campus Director. His transition from one private Midwestern university to a non-profit

trade school and then to a private Northeastern college, where he significantly improved campus performance across each institution, indicated an adeptness at management and leadership.

His path took a reflective turn when personal challenges and health concerns prompted him to prioritize his well-being and family, leading him to accept a Dean's role as a means to "slow down." Yet, this role only served as a steppingstone to greater responsibility when Miriam, his predecessor, saw in him a leader fit to assume the presidency, recommending him to the Board. Smith's ascent to the presidency was not driven by ambition alone but by a recognition from others of his ability to lead and make a difference. He emphasized the importance of diligence and taking on challenges, stating, "there's no such thing as luck; it's all about working hard and taking advantage of the opportunities that are before you." His leadership philosophy is deeply influenced by his diverse experiences and the mentorship he received along the way, guiding him to lead with a focus on making a tangible difference in the lives of those his institution serves. In his role as President, Smith is driven by the desire to effect change and improve the lives of his students, particularly those from underserved communities.

### *Familiarization with a New Institution*

**Initial Familiarization.** President Smith's integration into Hopeville Community College was characterized by a conscientious approach to understanding and adapting to a new cultural and professional environment. Confronted with the dual challenges of transitioning to a smaller town from a big city and not speaking Spanish, Smith recognized the need for a strategic and humble approach. He reflected on his experience, saying, "Yeah…everything is a challenge. And when I came here, I don't speak Spanish, I'm learning... Everything

was…against me." Drawing from his tenure at four previous institutions, Smith understood the value of learning from each transition. "Every time you make that transition, you get to learn how to transition," he explained. This insight informed his approach to familiarization at Hopeville Community College: to absorb and build relationships without rushing to implement changes. "I didn't try to change anything...all I wanted to do was to be a sponge. That's all, that was it... I had two objectives, be a sponge, and build relationships. Nothing else," Smith stated. Despite initial skepticism from the campus community about his potential tenure, Smith's focus on relationship-building and his wealth of management experience gradually earned him respect. He shared, "I started to build all the relationships within the campus, and they knew that... I knew how to manage people." A significant part of Smith's learning curve involved understanding California's specific regulatory environment and the intricacies of union contracts, which were more comprehensive than those he had encountered previously. He noted the stark differences from other states he had worked in, where the regulations do not “infringe on to workers or managers rights. Where if you look at [the California] CTA, our bargaining units here, a lot of that language does infringe on managers rights, even discipline, a lot of things." This necessitated a period of adaptation and learning, during which Smith relied on colleagues like Miriam to navigate these complexities. Smith's experience highlights the crucial role of adaptability, open-mindedness, and strategic relationship building in successfully transitioning to a new leadership role in a different institutional and cultural context.

**Allies and Detractors.** In the process of acclimatizing to his new role at Hopeville Community College, President Smith faced skepticism and resistance from some members of the campus community. There were "rumblings" suggesting that his tenure as an

administrator would be short-lived, fueled by doubts about his ability to adapt to the unique culture and expectations of the heavily Latino Hopeville community. However, Smith's dedicated focus on learning and building relationships gradually dismantled these barriers, earning him respect and support across the campus.

Smith's account also underscores a critical challenge in the form of potential detractors within the faculty. He pointed out that some faculty members might allow an administrator to unknowingly violate regulations, only to later use such missteps as leverage against them. This dynamic highlighted the importance of having reliable allies like Miriam, who provided not just guidance but also protection against potential pitfalls: "every time I made a decision... if I didn't have Miriam and have other people's support... they will allow you to break a law. And then they call you out."

**Campus Culture.** The campus culture at Hopeville Community College is rooted in community appreciation, collaborative success, and a notable pride in their achievements, such as recently winning a prestigious college excellence award. President Smith described it as "such a huge accomplishment for the institution for the community. It says that we're doing everything, everything it takes to make sure our students are successful. And our community is successful." An overwhelming majority of the staff at Hopeville Community College, approximately 95%, are highly committed to their roles, viewing their work as more than just a job but as "an obligation. This is a duty." This sense of duty is driven by their close ties to the local community, fostering an environment where "everyone is willing to go the extra mile to make sure that you're successful." This deep level of care and investment is considered a key factor in the college's ability to receive recognition like the aforementioned college excellence award. The collaborative spirit at Hopeville Community

College extends beyond its campus, where President Smith has established strong connections with local leaders and organizations. This network allows for a unique local support system, as evidenced by the ease with which college officials can engage with key community figures: "even as a Dean, you know, I can call the Mayor of La Plaza. I can call the Superintendent, the county school educational system, I can call anyone." Such relationships reflect a collective effort to ensure the welfare and success of its students, highlighting a culture where they “all come together to make sure that our students in our community can thrive."

### *Perspective on HSI Status*

President Smith's perspective on Hopeville Community College's status as a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) reflects a deep understanding of the unique challenges and opportunities faced by the student body, particularly in a rural, low-income community. He highlights the complex family dynamics that can sometimes act as barriers to higher education, noting, "a lot of times you see the families kind of hold some kids back because they don't want their kids to leave, particularly girls." To address educational limitations and expand opportunities, Smith emphasizes the college's efforts to forge partnerships and develop articulation agreements with nearby institutions, including those across the U.S. border and in neighboring states. He mentions attempts “to develop an articulation agreement” with universities in a neighboring Southwestern state as examples of proactive measures to provide students with broader educational paths.

Smith contrasts his experience at Hopeville Community College with that at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs), appreciating the significant impact that can be made at an HSI: "you are helping them, you are taking people out of poverty, you are

removing more barriers to their success." He values the opportunity to make a difference in students' lives by addressing equity, inclusion, and tailoring education to their cultural experiences. However, Smith also acknowledges the challenges inherent to serving a rural community, such as the limited availability of courses necessary for transferring to more prestigious institutions, which can restrict students' educational and career aspirations. "We just don't have the bandwidth to offer those courses," he explained. Furthermore, Smith touched on the political and social dynamics of operating near the border, such as the contentious debate around recent state legislation that allows out-of-state students to pay in-state tuition rates. This initiative has faced opposition from local conservative groups, showcasing the challenges of navigating diverse political landscapes in efforts to expand educational access and inclusivity.

### *Critical Incident #1: The Campus Flood*

Despite the college's preparedness for a hurricane, which was executed flawlessly with perfect infrastructure setup, a later, unreported storm caught the campus off guard, leading to extensive damage. This unexpected event resulted in power outages, flooded areas, downed trees, and disrupted campus operations, illustrating the unpredictable nature of emergency situations and the need for adaptability. The incident forced the college to consider closing the campus, a decision President Smith described as almost a "nuclear option" due to its impact on academic schedules and credit hours. About one-third of the campus buildings lost power, compelling the administration to move classes online, especially after one building's air conditioning unit was damaged, making it unsuitable for occupancy. The response to this emergency included a concerted effort from the IT and maintenance teams, and coordination with local utilities and government entities. Learning

from the initial hurricane's response, President Smith and his team enhanced their communication strategy. This included daily emails to the campus community and Board of Trustees, regular updates through social media and news releases, and engagement with the Academic Senate and other campus leaders. This ensured that all stakeholders were informed and could adjust to the changing situation.

President Smith praised the commitment of the maintenance and IT crews who worked through the holiday weekend to restore campus operations. The incident led to significant financial costs, nearly a million dollars, with efforts underway to secure reimbursement through federal agencies like FEMA. The transition to online classes, particularly for science labs, posed additional challenges but was managed through flexibility and adaptation. The administration held daily meetings with a diverse group of stakeholders, including around 10 to 15 people from different areas of expertise. These meetings facilitated a comprehensive response and allowed for the sharing of critical information and insights. The key lessons from "The Campus Flood" include the importance of communication, the value of having a diverse group of stakeholders involved in crisis management, and the need for ongoing preparedness for unforeseen events. President Smith stressed the need to learn from such incidents to enhance the college's resilience and response to future emergencies.

### *Critical Incident #2: The Controversial Hire*

This critical incident pertains to the complex interplay between operational decisions and political realities in leadership roles. The incident began with a rigorous, multi-layered hiring process designed to filter through hundreds of applicants and end in a decision that would be both operationally sound and politically acceptable. Despite this process, the hire

faced unexpected backlash due to the chosen candidate's political history and affiliations, which President Smith acknowledged but underestimated in terms of their impact. He described the hiring process as having "about four layers," from screening applications to a final review by the President's Cabinet. He noted the committee's enthusiasm for a candidate that he also believed was "really good," but Smith admitted to overlooking the "political affiliations and involvement" the candidate carried. Smith candidly reflected on this oversight, stating, "[As] the CEO you have to sit back and think from who can do the job well, not the best, well, as well as someone who can fit the political structure." The fallout from the hire was immediate and severe, with Smith facing criticism from various campus and community stakeholders. He recounted the aftermath: "Politically, I lost a lot of capital, it pissed a lot of people on campus off. That was like a different tenor on campus. It just…really caused a lot of anxiety." The controversy led to a vote that was "shut down in a very ugly, ugly way," sparking widespread concern and questioning of Smith's judgment and leadership.

In response to the situation, Smith embarked on a reflective and corrective path. He emphasized the importance of maintaining a "political lens" in decision-making, a lesson he derived from past readings and now, from harsh experience: "I gotta make sure that whoever I bring to them, particularly at that level, they are either neutral or supportive." The incident illuminated the need for political acumen alongside operational expertise. Further, Smith learned to engage more proactively with the Board, educating them on the hiring process's rigor and the implications of their decisions. He advised, "It'd be prudent of them not to say more than yes or no," to avoid legal complications from over-commenting on personnel decisions as they had done in this incident. Reflecting on the broader implications, Smith

recognized the inherent political nature of his role: "The role of the CEO is political... I cannot make a decision without thinking about the political ramifications for everything."

### *Critical Incident #3: The Faculty Sexual Harasser*

This final critical incident, which extended over several years, was characterized by a faculty member's repeated sexual harassment of “every woman” in their department. This behavior went unchecked due to a prevailing culture of leniency under the institution's previous President, where, as President Smith notes, "gross misbehavior" was not adequately penalized, creating "a culture of misbehavior and inappropriateness." Upon recognizing that the new administration led by Smith would not stand for such behavior, the victims were encouraged to come forward, leading to immediate action against the harasser. However, the resolution process was difficult to navigate. Smith faced the challenging decision of how to effectively address the perpetrator's actions while navigating potential legal and financial consequences. Ultimately, the decision to allow the harasser to resign was made—a decision that, while pragmatic, sparked backlash from the community. Victims and observers perceived this choice as an indication that the institution did not prioritize their safety or justice, despite it being a "common practice versus pursuing termination," as Smith explained.

In his reflection on the incident, Smith drives home the importance of clear communication and stringent enforcement of policies against misconduct. He asserts, "You [have] to constantly preach it. And you have to train your managers and you have to hold your managers accountable so they can respond accordingly." This proactive stance is crucial in ensuring that all incidents of sexual misconduct, no matter how minor they may seem, are reported to Human Resources for investigation to safeguard both the institution

and its members. In the aftermath of the harassment case, Smith and his administration took definitive steps to fortify the institution's commitment to preventing sexual harassment. These measures included mandating sexual harassment training for all staff, directly engaging with the victims to inform them of their rights and the support available, and significantly increasing the number of Title IX investigators and advisors on campus. Through these actions, Smith sought to not only address the immediate issue but also to signal a broader cultural shift within the institution, emphasizing that "this would never be tolerated." By advocating for transparency, accountability, and support, Smith aimed to restore trust and ensure a safe, respectful environment for all members of the academic community.

***Summary and Analysis***

President Smith emerged from a background of modest means and early missteps. His pathway was shaped by military discipline and a series of mentors who recognized and nurtured his potential. These experiences instilled in him a commitment to education as a tool for personal and community empowerment. His leadership philosophy, influenced by the hardships and lessons of his early life, prioritizes relationships and collective effort over authoritative governance. Smith argues for the importance of inspiring and rallying the college community towards common goals. Taking the helm at Hopeville Community College, Smith faced the dual challenges of acclimating to a new institutional culture and addressing the skepticism of those who doubted his longevity in the role. He countered this with a willingness to listen, learn, and build meaningful connections, and gradually won over skeptics and turned potential detractors into allies. Under his stewardship, the college has celebrated significant achievements, such as recently receiving a prestigious college

excellence award, and he has contributed to a campus culture that is invested in student success. Smith's leadership in practice focuses on accessibility, especially in serving the needs of a predominantly Latino and economically disadvantaged student population. His work to expand educational opportunities through partnerships and to confront the complex socio-political challenges unique to the region shows a nuanced understanding of the role of an HSI in a rural, border community.

In the wake of an unexpected storm that caused significant flooding and damage at the college, President Smith spearheaded a response that effectively leveraged the collegial and systemic dimensions of organizational behavior, while also working through the bureaucratic challenges presented by the situation. Despite thorough preparation for an earlier hurricane, the unforeseen second storm tested the institution's adaptability, forcing President Smith to consider closing the campus. The decision to transition classes online, especially in light of infrastructure damages, shows a systemic approach in responsiveness and maintaining educational continuity through new modes of instruction during a natural disaster. The collaborative effort to address the crisis—ranging from IT and maintenance teams working together to restore operations, to the administration's engagement with local utilities and governmental bodies—highlighted the collegial spirit that President Smith leaned on in the campus and local community. This team effort consisted of a series of daily briefings and communication strategies that kept all stakeholders, including the campus community and the Board of Trustees, informed, and involved in the response efforts. The bureaucratic dimension of the response was evident in the efforts to manage the fall-out from the storm, including determining and delegating proactive measures to adapt academic programs, such as the solutions for conducting science labs online. President Smith's

leadership during this hurricane points to the importance of comprehensive communication, the strength found in unity, and the value in preparedness for unpredictable challenges.

In a controversial hiring incident at the college, President Smith grappled with making operational decisions while navigating a fraught political landscape. The situation unfolded when a well-vetted candidate, chosen through a comprehensive four-layered hiring process, unexpectedly ignited controversy due to their political affiliations. Smith, acknowledging his oversight of the candidate's “political affiliations and involvement,” had to confront the reality that leadership decisions must align not only with operational excellence but also fit within the political context of the institution. The backlash from this decision underlines how external perceptions and internal politics can significantly impact leadership capital and campus harmony. Smith admitted this hire had eroded his political capital and created a campus divide. But the incident served as a key moment for Smith, giving him the opportunity to reassess his approach to decision-making by incorporating a "political lens" to foresee and potentially mitigate future controversies. The bureaucratic dimension was also seen in Smith's efforts to educate the Board about the procedures involved in personnel decisions. This incident not only refined Smith's leadership approach but also reinforced the need for political acumen and bureaucratic mindfulness in higher education leadership.

In addressing a prolonged case of sexual harassment within the faculty, President Smith utilized the bureaucratic and collegial dimensions of organizational behavior, while also drawing upon systemic approaches. The incident, rooted in a long-standing culture of tolerance for misconduct under prior leadership, presented Smith with the tough task of balancing legal and institutional constraints against the community's demand for justice and

safety. In taking action against the harasser, Smith opted for his resignation, a decision of bureaucratic pragmatism though it was met with public dissatisfaction. Smith's response utilized the collegial aspect by advocating for a united front among the administration and faculty to uphold the safety of the campus. There was also a comprehensive review and reinforcement of policies against sexual misconduct, showcasing the systemic dimension of Smith's approach. This included mandatory training sessions to raise awareness, a direct dialogue with affected individuals to reinforce their rights and available support, and an addition of Title IX personnel to ensure responsiveness to future allegations of harassment. Through these measures, Smith aimed to recalibrate the previously problematic institutional culture with a zero-tolerance stance on sexual harassment and a commitment to protecting campus employees. President Smith's handling of the situation reflects a blend of operational decision-making, community engagement, and implementation of systemic reforms aimed at preventing future incidents.

President Smith's handling of unexpected challenges, such as a devastating storm, shows his ability to unify the college community, leveraging collegial and systemic responses while working through bureaucratic requirements. The incident involving a controversial hire revealed the critical importance of political awareness in leadership decisions, emphasizing the need to balance operational requirements with the institution's political context. Addressing a case of faculty sexual misconduct, Smith showed a commitment to creating a safe campus environment by employing a combination of bureaucratic will and systemic reform. Across these challenges, Smith's leadership is an example of adaptability, reflection, and a valuing of community well-being.

**Case 2: President Carmen Reyes, Valley Gateway College**

> “It's really important to have strong convictions, and to understand your purpose. And yes, we all have different styles, but having that confidence in your core as to why you do what you do, is really important.” (Reyes, 2023)

### *Pathway to Presidency*

**Family Background and Education.** President Reyes grew up in the vibrant yet challenging environment of a major city in Southern California, where she was "born and raised...in [urban] public schools” her entire life. She was a first-generation college student with "immigrant parents from Mexico.” Tragically, her mother passed away when she was "very, very young," which led to her combined family of seven children being raised by her father and aunt, with her aunt taking on the maternal role. Despite the economic modesty of the household—her mother working in a laundry facility and her father as a custodian—Reyes embarked on a path that would lead her to become the first in her family to successfully navigate the waters of higher education. Reyes' academic journey took her from a local public high school to the broader horizons of an elite Southern California public university, where she was a "proud beneficiary of affirmative action." This transition introduced her to a new world of diversity and opportunity, where she eventually double-majored in Chicana/Chicano Studies and Sociology. Reyes’ thirst for knowledge and commitment to education propelled her to an urban private Midwestern university for her master's, followed by a return to her alma mater in Southern California, for a Ph.D. in Education.

Reyes’ teaching career began in a major urban Southern California public school district, teaching adult education at night, a role that personally resonated deeply with Reyes due to her father's own experience with adult school. This period of teaching, coupled with

her time as an Adjunct Professor teaching Political Science at a Southern California community college district, sharpened her focus on understanding the "resiliency of young mothers of color as they navigated community college." Reyes' administrative career in higher education started at her doctorate institution's graduate division, where she was involved in the work of scholarships and awards. This position not only introduced her to the intricacies of graduate education but also the underrepresentation of students of color in Ph.D. programs. Inspired by Professor Manny Santiago's work on the scarcity of Chicanos attaining Ph.D.'s, Reyes accepted the challenge to pursue a doctoral degree herself, aiming to contribute to changing that situation.

**Mentors.** While President Reyes did mention an Upward Bound advisor from high school that she still keeps in contact with, it was faculty that seemed to be most influential on her pathway to the presidency. Her academic path was significantly shaped by her encounters with faculty mentors during her undergraduate studies, who she says "encouraged me" to pursue higher education. Among these mentors, Professor Manny Santiago stands out as a particularly key figure. Reyes describes him as "my advisor to this day," impacting not only her academic career but also her professional life. Years later when she entered the realm of higher education administration, Reyes found a Latina mentor for the first time in her thirties, who also "continues to be a very strong mentor." This relationship in particular speaks to the significance of representation and relatability in mentorship. The presence of these "guardian angels" nudged, encouraged, and pushed her forward, and helped her overcome self-doubt and resistance. Reyes explained the importance of these mentors, noting, "at every stage, there was somebody who believed."

**Challenges, Obstacles and Complications.** President Reyes' pathway to the presidency experienced challenges that stemmed from her identity. Looking back, Reyes noted, "higher ed has been very hostile to being a woman of color and being a parent." This environment tested her and fueled her determination to succeed against the odds. Reyes found motivation in a desire to defy the expectations and skepticism of others, a sentiment echoed by the women she interviewed during her early research. "They would say to me, 'I want to prove him wrong, I want to prove her wrong, I want to prove them wrong,'" Reyes recalled, identifying with their determination to succeed in spite of naysayers. Despite her accomplishments, Reyes frequently encountered gender-based assumptions and biases that undermined her authority and presence. "I can't tell you how many times I've been in a room, I can be a broken record, and say the same thing. But a man says it and it's heard," she recounted, pointing to the persistent sexism and stereotypical expectations regarding leadership and appearance in academia. Even after assuming the presidency, Reyes faced skepticism and underestimation. An administrator's cautionary advice—"you should really be careful about who you talk to, because you don't look like a president, you know that, right"—served as a stark reminder of the prejudiced perceptions she continues to confront. Reyes' experiences underscore the widespread challenges faced by women, particularly women of color, in leadership roles within higher education. Despite these obstacles, her resolve remains unshaken, driven by a deep-seated fight that seems to grow stronger with each challenge.

**Professional Roles and Inspirations.** President Reyes' post-Ph.D. career began in the classroom, where she “taught Poli Sci for 20 years as a community college faculty member” and, eventually, as a union leader as well. Reyes' path took a significant turn when

California's governor called for enhanced collaboration between community colleges and K-12 institutions. Seizing the opportunity, Reyes approached the President with a proposal to lead the initiative. "I went to my college president and I said, I want to do this, and I want to get involved in implementing [it]," she explained, reflective of her passion for serving immigrant and underserved populations through Adult Education and noncredit programs. Her innovative work in expanding Adult Education and Career Technical Education (CTE) at a Southern California community college led to significant program growth and the creation of a Vice President position overseeing these areas. Reyes' transition from faculty to administration was groundbreaking: "Faculty to Vice President...that was a leap." This move was particularly notable given her previous role as the chief negotiator for the district's faculty union. Her tenure as Vice President was characterized by innovative leadership in CTE and Adult Education, which laid the groundwork for her eventual appointment as college president. After five years as Vice President, Reyes took on her current role at Valley Gateway College, bringing a wealth of experience, a deep understanding of community college dynamics, and a profound commitment to equity and access in higher education.

### *Familiarization with a New Institution*

**Initial Familiarization.** When she first arrived at Valley Gateway College, President Reyes engaged in a deliberate and purposeful process to familiarize herself with her new environment, fueled by a commitment to serve disenfranchised, poor, and communities of color. She assumed the presidency in the wake of COVID-19 when the campus was largely deserted, save for the facilities staff. These initial encounters with the classified and facilities staff provided Reyes with invaluable context about the college. "The classified staff, the

facilities guys, they completely embraced me," she recalled. Reyes' approach to leadership is rooted in community engagement and service, so she prioritized establishing connections with campus leadership, faculty, new hires, and notably, the wider community. Reyes's efforts extended beyond the campus boundaries as she actively sought out and engaged with local elected officials, community leaders, and CEOs of nonprofits. "I'm a really strong believer that we don't just sit back and see who shows up at our doorstep," Reyes states. Under Reyes' leadership, Valley Gateway College has expanded its footprint within the community, notably opening a new site in a nearby community and pursuing initiatives to increase accessibility to higher education. Her vision includes expanding Adult Education, introducing athletic fields, and enhancing the college's academic offerings, including a baccalaureate and Biotech labs. Reyes is driven by a sense of urgency to address the enrollment decline experienced during her arrival, aiming for much needed growth, reengagement with the community, and a balanced expansion of short-term and long-term courses across online and in-person formats.

**Allies and Detractors.** During President Reyes' transition to Valley Gateway College, she encountered a range of responses from the college community, with some individuals expressing resistance to her new approaches and ideas. Reyes observed, "many said no way. We've done this a certain way. And that's not going to change," reflecting the challenge of initiating change within an established institution. Despite the presence of detractors and naysayers, Reyes maintained a pragmatic and inclusive leadership philosophy, acknowledging the broad spectrum of perspectives within the college. She made clear her commitment to progress, leveraging the support of those aligned with her vision while

understanding and accepting resistance as a natural part of the change process. "You're always going to have the whole gamut," Reyes noted.

**Campus Culture.** Valley Gateway College's campus culture consists of a sense of community pride that is reflected in the college's history and its strong connections to local activism. The college, which is the youngest in a major Southern California community college district and approaching its 50th anniversary, was established through the efforts of local activists who fought to have the college located within their community rather than one nearby. The college, along with the Southern California community college she had previously worked, boasts the highest rates of Latino populations among the many colleges in the district, with both far surpassing HSI enrollment thresholds. Despite the commonalities shared across the district's colleges in terms of serving diverse, first-generation students of color, Valley Gateway College stands out for this significant concentration of Latino students. President Reyes aims to position the college not just as an institution of higher learning, but as an integral partner within the community. This approach highlights a commitment to not being "siloed" within the college but rather actively and meaningfully serving the broader community.

### *Perspective on HSI Status*

President Reyes views Valley Gateway College's status as a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) not merely as a label or a demographic marker but as a core aspect of the college's identity and operational fabric. With a student body that is over 80% Latino, immigrant, and first-generation, Reyes asserted that being an HSI is fundamental to the college's approach to student success. For her, serving Latino students is not an added component or an afterthought; it is fundamental to how the college functions. "It's our

identity," she emphasized, indicating that workshops or toolkits on serving Hispanic students are redundant for a college with such a critical mass of Latinos. Every aspect of the college's operations—from scheduling and support services to considerations of the family unit—is naturally designed to serve the needs of Latino students. This approach contrasts with the need to specifically target Latino students as a distinct group within the college. “I get that some college presidents might look at serving Latinos [that] way because it's such a small population,” Reyes pointed out, “it’s not my experience here…the last data I got we were 86%.”

### *Critical Incident #1: The Satellite Campus*

President Reyes recently led an expansion of Valley Gateway College into a nearby community, located about five miles south of the home campus. This new site, situated in a predominantly immigrant Latino area, aligns with the college's mission to provide accessible educational opportunities, older adult programs, and immigrant resources. However, the expansion process was no simple task. Reyes navigated complex bureaucracies, including negotiating leases, ensuring ADA compliance, and securing the necessary budget. Each step required extensive behind-the-scenes work. Reyes prioritized meeting community leaders and sought feedback from both the local community at large and the campus community. This engagement was key in securing federal funding, which Reyes made clear was essential for the project's kickoff, noting that it "really takes a lot of planning to be able to secure those dollars." Introducing the satellite campus also meant shifting the college community's perspective of seeing itself as a single campus 2-year institution rather than what she was striving for: an institution with multiple sites serving non-traditional student populations. Reyes had to make the case to campus constituents for the need to adjust to serving a more

diverse student body, including older adults, and providing instruction in Spanish, which was "a different academic vernacular" for some. Further, Reyes reflected on the need for a balanced approach in leadership, recognizing that her action-oriented style needed to be tempered with patience and consideration for different perspectives within her team. She acknowledged the learning curve involved in managing the expectations and paces of others, admitting, "I have to reflect and understand that, you know, not everybody's where I'm at."

### *Critical Incident #2: The Military Charter School*

President Reyes sought a partnership with a local military charter school that served primarily young men of color. The charter school, facing financial difficulties, requested to co-locate to the Valley Gateway College campus. In response, Reyes envisioned creating a Middle College High School, an innovative educational model where high school students would be fully integrated into college-level courses, enabling them to graduate simultaneously with a high school diploma and an Associate's degree. Reyes described the initiative's goal as "amazing," highlighting the profound impact it could have had on transforming the lives of families within the community. But “it didn't materialize…I spent a lot of capital and was not successful…it hurts in that we had the potential to truly transform families," she reflected. The obstacles encountered were primarily political complexities, and the controversial nature of the military aspect of the charter school. Reyes candidly shared, "It didn't help that it was a military school. It didn't help that it had financial issues. And the principal had a lot of varied skeletons that were exposed along the way." Despite the setbacks, Reyes remained undeterred, "I'm not afraid of messy, especially if it's a good cause," she stated. But the breaking point came when the school's families and students, in a bid to show support, inadvertently upset the college's board and other

stakeholders by filling the boardroom during a critical meeting. Reyes recognized the significance of their actions but also the consequential challenges they presented. "When they filled up the boardroom, these beautiful families and their sons, it just brought a whole other level of scrutiny. That was very unsettling for our board members," she explained, highlighting the tension between passionate community activism and the personal fragilities of the board members. "It was painful because I saw the need. And I was hoping to be a part of that remedy," Reyes shared. In the aftermath, there was no significant fallout for the college, but for Reyes, the incident was a key reminder of the challenges of the college presidency, especially when taking risks on pursuing innovative and transformative educational initiatives.

***Critical Incident #3: The Organizational Restructure***

President Reyes, driven by a student-centered philosophy, aimed to realign Valley Gateway College's structure to better serve its student body, despite the pushback from entrenched institutional norms and personnel. "I did a reorg that was based on what I felt was right for the institution," Reyes stated. This restructuring involved aligning student services and instructional divisions more logically, moving away from a convoluted system where services were scattered due to historical interpersonal dynamics rather than strategic planning. Reyes faced opposition, with some staff expressing that "we've done that for years. It's not gonna work." Yet, she pushed forward to do what was best for the institution's future rather than maintaining the status quo for the comfort of a few.

Seeking models of success, Reyes consulted with other college presidents who had navigated similar challenges. This approach helped her to envision and implement a structure that aligned with the state-mandated Guided Pathways framework, organizing

academic programs into six distinct pathways to streamline the student experience. Despite initial resistance, particularly from the Deans who were skeptical of the changes, Reyes' extensive consultation efforts and reliance on data eventually garnered support for the restructuring. She embarked on a "roadshow" to explain the rationale behind the proposed changes and the need for administrative adjustments to support this new academic structure. "The faculty were like, 'we want somebody who understands our areas of expertise.' So once the Deans understood that it was going to happen, they eventually came around," Reyes shared. This critical incident offers a glimpse at her leadership philosophy—making decisions that prioritize student success over institutional precedent. "In my tenure, folks know, she doesn't care if we don't like each other. She just wants to do right by students," Reyes remarked.

***Summary and Analysis***

President Reyes was a first-generation college student from Southern California with a background that reflects the challenges and aspirations of the community she now serves. Her pathway to the presidency was paved by strong convictions, a sense of purpose, and the influence of mentors who recognized her potential and instilled in her the confidence to pursue ambitious goals. Reyes' approach to leadership at Valley Gateway College is characterized by a commitment to inclusivity, particularly in serving a predominantly Latino, immigrant, and first-generation college student population. Her efforts as President have been aimed at engaging with and expanding the college's role within the local community, including initiatives to increase accessibility to higher education. She views the college's status as a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) not as a designation but as an integral part of its identity. Reyes assumed her role in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Despite encountering skepticism and resistance to change, her leadership philosophy—rooted in pragmatism, inclusiveness, and progress—has contributed to a culture of pride and success within the college, building on its rich history and strong community ties. President Reyes aims to ensure that Valley Gateway College remains a vital, vibrant institution dedicated to serving its students and the broader community.

In launching the satellite campus of Valley Gateway College in a nearby community, President Reyes applied the bureaucratic and collegial dimensions of organizational behavior, with a secondary emphasis on the symbolic dimension. She navigated the bureaucracies involved in expanding the college's footprint, addressing logistical hurdles such as lease negotiations, ADA compliance, and budget allocations with meticulous attention to detail. Reyes' collegial engagement with both the college and the community that would host the satellite campus shows her faithfulness to collaborative decision-making. By actively seeking input from community leaders and campus constituents, she created a sense of shared vision. Symbolically, the establishment of the satellite campus represented a shift in how Valley Gateway College perceived its role within the educational landscape, signaling a transition from a single-campus institution to a multi-site entity dedicated to serving a diverse and often non-traditional student population. Reyes sought to offer programs catering to the specific needs of the host community, such as courses for older adults and instruction in Spanish. Her efforts on this project exemplified her adept use of bureaucratic, collegial, and symbolic organizational behaviors to achieve a landmark development for Valley Gateway College.

In attempting to forge a partnership with a local military charter school, President Reyes engaged with the political and symbolic dimensions of organizational behavior. Her

ambitious vision was to integrate these high school students into the college environment and build out a program where they would earn both a high school diploma and an Associate's degree. Her aim was to uplift these young men of color and their families within the community. However, the plan faced substantial political hurdles, compounded by the charter school's military association and its financial instability. The political landscape was further complicated by concerns with the school principal's past, which Reyes acknowledged as an additional barrier for the project. Despite these challenges, Reyes' determination remained unwavering. Yet, the initiative was halted when the enthusiastic involvement of the school's families inadvertently intensified scrutiny from the college's board and other key stakeholders. The incident, while ultimately not leading to the desired outcome, shows Reyes' bold approach to leadership, and her readiness to challenge the status quo and pursue groundbreaking opportunities, despite the risks and potential for failure.

In her initiative to restructure Valley Gateway College, President Reyes utilized the bureaucratic, collegial, and systemic dimensions of organizational behavior. She directed a major reorganization, motivated by a vision to create a more logical and cohesive structure that prioritized student needs over long-standing, but inefficient, institutional practices. In the process, Reyes had to confront calcified routines and the skepticism of staff, including some who doubted the feasibility of her plans. By consulting with peers and drawing upon successful models, Reyes looked to align the college's structure with the Guided Pathways framework. Despite facing initial resistance, particularly from Deans suspicious of the changes, consultation and clear communication gradually built consensus around the restructuring. Her "roadshow" was a collegial strategy of engaging stakeholders directly, addressing their concerns, and rallying support around a shared vision for student success.

The systemic dimension of Reyes' actions was clear in her strategic alignment of academic programs into distinct pathways, which was an effort to streamline the student experience going forward. Her approach during the restructuring is a great example of what it looks like to create lasting organizational change.

President Reyes' efforts to expand access through the establishment of a satellite campus show her strategic use of collaboration and administrative acumen while reinforcing the college's commitment to community inclusivity. Her attempted partnership with a military charter school reflects her willingness to explore innovative educational pathways despite facing significant political and public hurdles. The reorganization of the college demonstrates Reyes' focus on prioritizing efficiency and student success over historical institutional practices. Throughout her tenure, Reyes has embodied a leadership philosophy centered on purpose, access, and the relentless pursuit of educational equity.

### Case 3: President Mellie Kimperton, Meadow Ridge College

"At the end of the day, is it in the best interest of the students?" (Kimperton, 2023)

#### *Pathway to Presidency*

**Family Background and Education.** Born into a multi-ethnic family as one of seven children, with five siblings adopted from various racial backgrounds and two biological children of her white parents, President Kimperton's upbringing in the Bay Area, offered her a unique perspective on identity and belonging. "I was adopted internationally, from Korea, and my siblings are African American and Latinx. And then there's me, the Asian," Kimperton shares, highlighting the rich cultural milieu that shaped her early life. This diverse family setting provided Kimperton with an acute understanding of what it means to be 'othered,' fostering an early awareness of racial and social dynamics. Growing up in a

community where Black, Hispanic, and White cultures intertwined, she navigated the complexities of identity from a young age. This experience, coupled with her status as a first-generation college student, deeply influenced her educational and professional trajectory.

Kimperton's journey through higher education began at an elite Bay Area public university, where she was involved in TRIO programs, initiatives designed to support students from disadvantaged backgrounds. "I'm a product of affirmative action. So that's certainly why I got into [my alma mater]," she candidly remarked, underscoring the importance of these programs in providing opportunities for students like her. Her time at this elite Bay Area public university was marked by a significant cultural shift: "When I went to [my alma mater], I'd never seen so many Asian people in my life," she recalled, reflecting on the contrast between her high school experience and the university environment. Her work experience at the university spanned from financial aid to the Office of Student Life, which not only helped finance her education but also exposed her to the operational aspects of higher education. This immersion in college bureaucracy was instrumental in shaping her understanding of the systemic workings of educational institutions. Kimperton's engagement with student life and orientation programs further solidified her commitment to education as a pathway for social mobility and justice. The end of affirmative action during her time at this elite Bay Area public university propelled Kimperton into activism, which led to her participation in protests and organizing efforts on campus. This period of advocacy deepened her interest in policy and social justice, leading her to pursue graduate studies in counseling before ultimately gravitating towards educational policy. "For me, social justice, I could see with my family, and I could see when

I was at [my alma mater]," Kimperton explains, connecting her personal and academic experiences to a broader narrative of equity and access in education.

**Mentors.** Early in President Kimperton's career, she was inspired by Rosario Pineda, a queer Latina Chancellor known for her dedication to equity, opportunities, and social justice. Kimperton recalled being captivated by Pineda's vision and approach: "The way she spoke and how she talked about intergenerational honoring, and being about equity opportunities, social justice... I was like, I want to work for her." This encounter steered Kimperton towards seeking a position within Pineda's district, marking the beginning of her administrative career in higher education. Bill Donato, another significant mentor, was instrumental in Kimperton's development as a community college leader. Donato, a respected figure in the Central Valley and former president of a rural Central Valley community college, treated Kimperton with immense respect and generosity, despite her being a young leader. His support and example left a lasting impact on Kimperton. Geno Callejo, a Dean of special programs and a man with a rich history of social justice activism, was pivotal in Kimperton's early career. His connection to her alma mater and shared commitment to social justice resonated with Kimperton, providing her with opportunities to explore and innovate within her role. Callejo's support was crucial in allowing Kimperton to apply her policy background and student affairs experience to meaningful projects at an East Bay community college.

Throughout her career, Kimperton has been encouraged by other various presidents and leaders who provided her with the freedom to be creative, explore beyond her "lane," and make missteps without fear. This level of support and encouragement has been integral to her development as a community college administrator. A turning point in Kimperton's

career came when she was tapped on the shoulder to serve as Vice President of Student Affairs at a South Bay community college, a move that showcased her versatility and capability in leadership roles. This experience opened doors for her to transition from student affairs to instruction, further broadening her expertise and impact. Eventually, Kimperton was approached to take on a district-wide role focusing on diversity and inclusion at another East Bay community college, highlighting her reputation as a transformative leader capable of addressing complex institutional challenges. These key figures—Pineda, Donato, Callejo, and others—played a crucial role in nurturing Kimperton's talents and guiding her path to becoming a prominent leader in higher education.

**Challenges, Obstacles and Complications.** President Kimperton's pathway to the presidency has been marked by challenges related to identity and belonging, influenced by her unique upbringing. "I didn't grow up in an Asian family," she explained, highlighting the diverse, multi-ethnic environment of her youth that shaped her worldview, far removed from the conventional Asian American experience. This discrepancy between how she sees herself and how others perceive her has led to unexpected and sometimes unsettling interactions, such as when someone remarked, "You sure do like Black people." Such comments underscore the disconnect between her self-identity and others' perceptions based on superficial racial assumptions. Her college years further illuminated these challenges. Despite seeking to explore her Asian identity, Kimperton found herself gravitating towards communities that offered her affirmation and support, notably the Gospel Choir and the Chicano Latino club. "The Asian community wasn't really feeling me," she recalls, indicating a sense of alienation from her ethnic roots in favor of spaces where she felt more

accepted. Over time, Kimperton has come to appreciate the significance of her position as an Asian woman in leadership. "Identity is important for folks who are Asian to see a leader and a woman who's gotten to the [presidency]," she acknowledges, committing herself to embrace and highlight her heritage to inspire others navigating their paths through similar challenges.

**Professional Development.** Reflecting on a leadership development program President Kimperton attended as a faculty member, she expressed mixed feelings, noting, "I did this Sylmar women's thing... I didn't really love it because it...lacked cultural nuance of folks of color." Despite her reservations about the program's cultural sensitivity, the experience was valuable for the opportunity it provided to connect with a colleague who is now a Vice President at an East Bay community college, demonstrating the importance of professional networks. As mentioned above, a pivotal moment in Kimperton's professional journey was hearing Chancellor Rosario Pineda speak, an experience she describes as "profound." Similarly, hearing from Dr. Deena Pitts, then the President of an East Bay community college and now with a neighboring state's system of colleges, further expanded Kimperton's view of what leadership could look like. "Hearing those two women who were identified out...and just different than anything I'd seen made me think like, 'Oh, you don't have to be a certain way to [do] this,'" Kimperton recalls. Beyond these formative experiences, Kimperton characterizes her approach to professional development simply: "I didn't do any other leadership development stuff. I was just a worker."

**Prior Professional Roles and Inspirations.** Starting her career working for the Early Academic Outreach Program, President Kimperton found her calling in serving communities similar to the one she grew up in, affirming her belief in programs like TRIO that support

underrepresented students. "I'm a big TRIO person," she stated. Later, her tenure at the Grasstops Institute as the Academy and Education Policy Director shaped her perspective on organizing and multi-ethnic coalition building. This experience, coupled with her involvement in the policy project for a rural Central Valley public university, ignited her passion for higher education's transformative role in communities, particularly those underserved and overlooked by the traditional education system.

Transitioning to work at an East Bay community college, Kimperton returned to her roots, starting a TRIO program for community college students. Her role evolved from a faculty member in counseling to becoming the Dean of Counseling at Meadow Ridge College, illustrating her rapid ascent through the academic ranks. Subsequent positions as Vice President of Academic Affairs at a South Bay community college and Executive Vice President at yet another East Bay community college further expanded her experience and influence. Her presidency at a fourth East Bay community college, however, marked a significant phase in her career, reflecting her skills at leading institutions through demographic shifts and identity transformations within diverse communities.

Kimperton's deep-rooted commitment to her community and her drive to make a tangible difference led her to these leadership positions. "I never was really looking to be a college president, frankly. So, I don't even know how it happened," she reflects, embodying a leadership style that prioritizes service over ambition. Through her work, Kimperton continues to champion policies and practices that address disparities and foster an inclusive, supportive environment for all students, drawing from her rich background and the lessons learned from each step of her professional journey.

### *Familiarization with a New Institution*

President Kimperton's approach to familiarizing herself with the Meadow Ridge campus and its community was a thoughtful blend of active listening, deep engagement, and strategic action aimed at healing and moving forward. Upon arriving at a campus that had experienced significant turmoil, including leadership changes and the residual harm from previous administrations, Kimperton applied her counseling skills to understand the institutional memory and the emotional landscape of the community. "Institutions hold bones, right? They remember things," she reflected, highlighting the need to rebuild trust while being determined to improve standards and expectations for student success. Her strategy involved a hands-on approach, diving into the data to assess the college's standing and actively seeking out conversations with members of the community. By acknowledging the importance of voice and agency, Kimperton worked to empower faculty, staff, and students, fostering a culture of trust and collective responsibility. "How you build a culture of trust is like [asking], what's going on? Oh, we don't feel like we have a voice here. Well, let's figure out how to get you a voice," she explained. Kimperton's leadership style is also characterized by her presence and participation in the day-to-day activities of the college, a direct response to her observations of previous leadership practices that left her frustrated. "I'll never forget seeing all the vice presidents [or] presidents where they would come late to things, leave early…never helped with anything," she recalled, underscoring her dedication to being an active and supportive leader. Drawing from her background in community organizing and coalition building, Kimperton emphasizes the importance of working alongside the "gente" (people) to effectively navigate institutional dynamics and enact meaningful change. Her inclusive approach extends to all student groups, reflecting her commitment to the success of Hispanic, API, Black, and White students alike, through both

advocacy and excellence in education. Kimperton believes in the positive impact of her leadership, acknowledging that her familiarity with the campus and its constituents, coupled with the challenges posed by starting her role at the onset of the pandemic, played a crucial role in her ability to quickly acclimate and lead effectively.

**Allies and Detractors.** President Kimperton's familiarization process at Meadow Ridge College was not without its challenges, particularly in navigating the complex race politics prevalent in the Bay Area. As a woman of color who does not identify as Latina, Kimperton faced scrutiny and implicit biases that questioned her fit for leadership within the district's heavily Latino demographic context. "There is a level of race politics...that is true. So, you look at the intersectional identity of a woman, woman of color…not being a Latina is a big deal in this district," she observed, candidly acknowledging the external pressures and expectations that came with her role. Kimperton's leadership was initially met with skepticism and resistance from some segments of the community, including higher-level officials and board members, who may have preferred a leader who more closely represented the Latino community. This sentiment was evident in the non-unanimous votes she received upon her initial appointments. Despite these challenges, Kimperton's focus remained on serving the students and the community, a principle that ultimately garnered her broader support and unanimous approval in subsequent contract renewals. The identities that Kimperton navigates have been both a source of strength and a point of contention. The expectation for her to represent the Asian community, given the AANAPISI (Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institution) status of the institutions she led, added another layer to the complexity of her role. "API leaders are always sort of like, you're either a person of color, you're not; you're shooed to the side," she explained.

**Campus Culture.** President Kimperton described the culture at Meadow Ridge College with a sense of pride and admiration, highlighting its unique and collaborative community spirit. She views the college as a "hidden gem," tucked away yet vibrant with a rich student body, exceptional faculty, classified professionals, and administrators who contribute to its diversity and dynamism. The campus itself is not only aesthetically pleasing but also a hub of innovation and experimentation, where the willingness to try new things is embedded in the institutional ethos. Kimperton emphasizes the culture of connection, where elevating and supporting each other is a central tenet, embodying an "ethic of care" that, although not perfect, strives to uplift every member of the community. She contrasts Meadow Ridge's resources and conditions with her previous experiences, appreciating an environment that facilitates learning and teaching. Meadow Ridge's culture, resources, and community aligns with Kimperton's vision of the college as a beautiful, high-potential space for student success.

### *Perspective on HSI Status*

At Meadow Ridge, Kimperton encountered a campus that was initially balkanized, reminiscent of her college days at her alma mater, where ethnic and cultural groups had distinct spaces. She observed a strong sense of history and struggle within these groups, particularly among the Latino community, which fought hard for recognition and support through programs like Enlace. However, Kimperton also recognized the need for the college to evolve and embrace the changing identities and needs of its student body, including those with intersectional identities who might not feel served by traditional programs. She has committed to expanding the notion of what it means to be an HSI, challenging the community to think beyond established programs and to consider the broader needs of a

diverse student population. "We need to think of ourselves as how are we really a Hispanic Serving Institution," she asserted, advocating for a more inclusive approach that acknowledges the varied experiences and needs of Latino students and beyond. Her efforts to engage with community leaders and to explain the college's direction have often led to understanding and support, though she acknowledges the ongoing challenge of balancing the distribution of resources and attention.

### *Critical Incident #1: The Body in the Lake*

This critical incident presented President Kimperton and the Meadow Ridge College community with a serious and somber challenge. Upon receiving a report of a possible body floating in the campus pond, President Kimperton, alongside campus police, swiftly initiated protocols to manage the situation with sensitivity and care. Kimperton's approach was marked by a calm and methodical handling of the situation, emphasizing the importance of not causing unnecessary alarm while ensuring the community was informed. "What I'm always thinking about is how do you keep the community safe? When do you communicate with them? How do you have enough information that you can provide information?" she pondered, highlighting her commitment to transparency and responsibility. The discovery of the body required a delicate balance of logistical coordination with law enforcement, the coroner's office, addressing the community's emotional response and arranging a dive team for the extraction of the body. This task was complicated by the pressures of social media and public perception, where misinformation and speculation could quickly escalate concerns about campus safety. Kimperton crafted a thoughtful message to the campus community. This communication provided a timeline of events, access to resources for those affected, and reassurance of the college's commitment to safety and support. Amidst the

unfolding events, Kimperton maintained a presence at campus activities, ensuring she was accessible and visible to the community. Through this trying time, President Kimperton demonstrated leadership qualities that prioritized human dignity, community cohesion, and effective crisis management.

### *Critical Incident #2: COVID*

The COVID-19 pandemic represented a pivotal and unprecedented challenge for President Kimperton and the entire Meadow Ridge College community. Faced with the task of maintaining connection, academic integrity, and the well-being of students and staff in a dispersed and digital environment, Kimperton spearheaded a comprehensive and empathetic response to the crisis. As a Hispanic Serving Institution in the Silicon Valley, where Latino populations were significantly impacted, she was acutely aware of the heightened need to target support towards the most affected students. Efforts were made to channel resources and create online community supports that addressed the specific hardships faced by high-need students, leveraging federal and institutional funds designated for minority-serving institutions. In the summer of 2021, Meadow Ridge College took the bold step of returning to campus earlier than many other institutions, a decision that raised questions but ultimately proved to be a wise choice. Protocols were established to ensure the safety of all individuals on campus, including vaccination requirements and accommodations for those unable to return due to health concerns. This early return was guided by the principle that students benefit from face-to-face services and the communal aspect of college life.

The transition to online learning and the eventual return to campus required a collective effort across all constituencies, including administration, faculty, and unions. Innovative solutions were implemented, such as distributing lab kits to students at home and

reimagining graduation ceremonies to celebrate student success safely. President Kimperton's leadership during this period was characterized by clear communication, decisive action, and a willingness to listen and adapt to the concerns of the college community. The pandemic also spurred a reevaluation of academic and operational practices, leading to improved online services, overhauled website information, and a reassessment of assumptions about student needs and access.

### *Critical Incident #3: The Accreditation Plan*

During President Kimperton's tenure at Meadow Ridge College, a critical incident arose concerning the institution's accreditation status, centered around the necessity to enhance student learning outcomes, assessments, and programmatic planning. The college was tasked with reforming decision-making processes that better aligned with its mission and vision. A pivotal element of addressing these accreditation concerns was the adoption of a more frequent and rigorous program review cycle, moving from a six-year to a four-year cycle to reflect rapidly changing student needs and industry demands, especially crucial in the fast-paced Silicon Valley environment. Despite the logical rationale for this shift, President Kimperton faced significant resistance, particularly from the faculty and academic senate leadership. Critics voiced concerns over increased workload and questioned the administration's commitment to addressing faculty needs and resource allocation. In response, President Kimperton embarked on a year-long effort to systematically address these concerns, working collaboratively across the college community to align programs with the educational master plan and strategic plan, aiming to ensure resources were used efficiently and programs were responsive to student needs.

Despite addressing the concerns raised and garnering support from various factions within the college, including some faculty members, classified professionals, and student affairs administrators, the academic senate leadership remained opposed. Their resistance culminated in a push to influence the college council's vote against adopting the four-year review cycle. However, after extensive discussions, the college council voted in favor of the new cycle, a decision that Kimperton, as college president, ultimately upheld, providing a generous multi-year onramp period for implementation. This decision proved instrumental in Meadow Ridge College's subsequent accreditation reaffirmation process. The institution was able to demonstrate comprehensive and integrated planning and assessment processes, resulting in no court inquiries or recommendations from the accrediting body—an uncommon and notable achievement in higher education accreditation. Throughout this process, Kimperton navigated political dynamics, leveraging her leadership to support and empower college leaders while also standing firm on decisions that prioritized student success and institutional accountability. Allies in this effort included faculty leaders committed to institutional effectiveness and classified professionals who advocated for moving the college forward. This incident underscores the challenges and complexities of leading an academic institution through change, especially when balancing internal politics with external accreditation demands.

### *Summary and Analysis*

President Kimperton's leadership at Meadow Ridge College is informed by a firm commitment to student-centered decision-making. She grew up in a multi-ethnic family and navigated the complexities of identity from an early age, providing her with a unique understanding of the nuances of belonging and inclusion. Her journey through higher

education involved participation in TRIO programs and activism, which laid the groundwork for a focus on social justice in her professional career. Kimperton learned from key mentors who provided her with opportunities and inspired her to take on leadership positions. As President, she has aimed to create a culture that values collaboration, innovation, and mutual care, hoping to transform the college into a space where every member feels supported. Despite challenges, including navigating identity politics and institutional resistance, Kimperton's focus remains on creating an environment where decisions are always made with students' best interests at heart, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

In handling the discovery of a dead body in the campus pond, President Kimperton effectively engaged the bureaucratic, collegial, and systemic dimensions of organizational behavior, as well as leveraging the symbolic dimension. Her immediate and structured response to this critical incident involved actively working with campus police and coordinating with external law enforcement and the coroner's office, showing her bureaucratic ability in managing emergency protocols. Kimperton's commitment to collegiality was evident in her compassionate efforts to keep the campus community informed without causing panic. By offering resources and support to those impacted, she flexed the systemic support in place for community members during crises. Symbolically, her visibility and accessibility on campus during this period reinforced a sense of leadership presence and stability, which sent a strong message about the institution's strength in the face of tragedy and her role as a unifying figure. This incident highlighted Kimperton's skillful balance of logistical, emotional, and communicative demands.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, President Kimperton worked through challenges faced by Meadow Ridge College through effective use of the bureaucratic, collegial, and systemic organizational behaviors, while also incorporating symbolic actions. Recognizing the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on Latino students in the Silicon Valley area, Kimperton spearheaded targeted support initiatives by utilizing federal and institutional resources to address their specific needs. The decision to return to campus in the summer of 2021, earlier than many other campuses, was proof of Kimperton's bold leadership and her prioritization of students' academic and social well-being. She implemented comprehensive safety protocols and showed her ability to manage bureaucratic challenges effectively. This move was based on her belief in the value of in-person education and services for students. Kimperton also contributed to a spirit of collaboration across the college, working closely with faculty, staff, and union representatives to ensure a smooth transition to online learning and a safe return to campus. This collegial approach led to creative solutions, such as home-delivered lab kits and virtual graduation ceremonies. Systemically, the pandemic prompted a re-evaluation of educational processes and support services, leading to improvement in online offerings and a more accessible, user-friendly website. Symbolically, Kimperton's leadership during the pandemic aimed to reinforce a sense of community by communicating a message of unity and adaptability. In the end, Meadow Ridge College emerged stronger and more cohesive than before the pandemic.

In tackling the revision of Meadow Ridge College's accreditation plan, President Kimperton effectively employed bureaucratic, collegial, and political strategies, complemented by a systemic approach to organizational change. Confronted with accreditation requirements to enhance student learning outcomes, Kimperton led an

initiative to shorten the program review cycle from six years to four. This adjustment aimed to better align the college with the changing needs of both students and the surrounding Silicon Valley market. Despite the clear benefits of the move, Kimperton faced pushback, especially from faculty and academic senate leaders concerned about the potential for increased workload and the implications for how resources might be distributed. In response, she set out on a year-long collaborative process, engaging in dialogue, and seeking common ground among diverse college constituencies. However, the political dimension of organizational behavior became particularly important as Kimperton fought through opposition from academic senate leadership. Despite the resistance, the college council's vote in favor of the new review cycle represented a pivotal moment. Kimperton's decision to firmly support this outcome, even providing a phased implementation timeline, points to her handling of internal politics. The systemic impact of this decision-making process was evident in the college's subsequent accreditation success, which was positively recognized by the accrediting body. Through this experience, Kimperton not only navigated the complex blend of bureaucratic procedures and college politics but also led a systemic transformation that positioned Meadow Ridge College for continued excellence in a competitive educational landscape.

President Kimperton's leadership at Meadow Ridge College has prioritized student welfare and community cohesion. She wisely handled a crisis involving a body discovered in the campus pond, demonstrating effective crisis management. During the COVID-19 pandemic, she led through unprecedented challenges and targeted support for student and community well-being. In addressing accreditation challenges, Kimperton successfully broke through institutional resistance to implement necessary academic review process

changes, achieving significant accreditation success. Through these actions, Kimperton has cemented her legacy at Meadow Ridge College as a leader who values progress and the impact of decisions on the student body.

### Case 4: President Luis Mendoza, Cedar Trails Community College

"If it's not me, then who else? I'd rather be the person in that position…for me, that's part of my drive, to better serve the students" (Mendoza, 2023)

#### *Pathway to Presidency*

**Family Background and Education.** Born in Mexico, President Mendoza's family migrated to the United States when he was four, settling in a rural, agricultural region of a Northwestern state. From the age of six, Mendoza was introduced to the rigors of farm work, initially tasked with moving water up and down rows of asparagus. This quickly became tedious, so he decided to pick up a knife and join his family in the more engaging task of harvesting asparagus. This early work experience was not just about contributing to the family's income; it was a foundational lesson in the values of hard work and the importance of each member's contribution to the collective effort. As Mendoza grew older, his father's decision to move his family out of town to a rural area with about ten acres was strategic, aiming to keep his children busy and away from potential negative influences such as gangs. Mendoza describes this period as pivotal, noting, "My father... started putting us to work there when we would get home from work... he kept us busy intentionally." Meanwhile, Mendoza's mother was a beacon of educational aspiration, driving home the power of education as a pathway to a better future. The realization that Mendoza's future would be limited without education led him to appreciate the opportunities that schooling provided. In a sense, education served as a refuge for him from the physical demands of

farm work and a pathway to a brighter future. "When I was in school... I don't have to worry about if it's hot, cold, or raining outside," he explained.

Mendoza's path to higher education was paved by his siblings, who attended colleges and universities before him, and set a precedent within the family. Opting to attend a Northwestern public university, he faced steep odds, balancing work, studies, and family responsibilities as a young father and husband. "I got a job at the library, which really helped me do some of the schoolwork... my singular focus was to get in and get out and complete," he shared. Later, his attempt to pursue a graduate program was met with frustrating administrative hurdles, including a clerical oversight that delayed his admission and forced him to miss a semester. This experience, due to the lack of support and information about the possibility of taking classes before formal admission into the program, shows the gaps in communication and assistance that students, especially those without a family history of navigating higher education, often encounter. "I was the first in my family to enter a graduate program... I didn't have anybody to guide me on what the application process looked like or what I needed to do," Mendoza stated. This experience not only affected him personally but also shaped his perspective on leadership and service in higher education: "That was frustrating…and so for me, that helps inform a lot of the decisions I make to say, don't believe just because you know it that students know it or other people know it."

**Mentors.** Some of the most transformative mentorships in President Mendoza's career came from established leaders in higher education. Don Richards, a President who Mendoza met at a conference, saw potential in him and offered unsolicited mentorship: "Have you ever thought about being a college president?... would you mind me helping you?" Richards' guidance was key. "He opened a whole new door for me to take a look at things," Mendoza

noted. Frank Ramirez, Chancellor of a Southern California community college district, was another crucial mentor, offering Mendoza a sense of belonging and a connection he had not experienced before: "I felt like I was at home... He was talking to me in Spanish…and I never got that in [the Northwest]." Ramirez's advice was immensely helpful to Mendoza in understanding and navigating California higher education and ultimately, his decision to apply for the presidency at Cedar Trails Community College. Mendoza attributed his success to these mentors, stating, "Don Richards... Frank Ramirez... they were the two mentors, I think, that changed my life in higher education." However, his mother was the most impactful mentor of all by imbuing in him a value for education: "without my education, I couldn't be in the position to even apply for these jobs."

**Challenges, Obstacles and Complications.** During President Mendoza's early career in higher education he experienced instances of discrimination. He vividly recalled an unsettling encounter after being passed over for a Director of Workforce Education position at a community college: "It's because of the way you look," the hiring manager told him, a comment that left him confused and upset. "It did have a negative impact on me for a while," Mendoza admitted. However, the challenges Mendoza faced were not limited to prejudice. Succeeding in his career required major personal sacrifices, including a grueling commute of 100 miles each way to a new job, which he undertook amid a tumultuous period in his personal life that included a divorce. Additionally, his role as Mayor of his hometown added another layer of complexity, exposing him to the harsh realities of local government: “politics is a vicious game." But each obstacle he faced also served as a steppingstone, pushing him forward and shaping him into a leader capable of understanding the struggles of

others. "Those are some of the things you need to overcome. Sometimes you have to take a risk and you have to go out of your comfort zone," Mendoza advised.

**Professional Roles and Inspirations.** President Mendoza's career began in K-12 teaching, where he quickly recognized a desire to impact higher education more broadly. "I taught, ended up teaching for…a couple years doing that and then I knew I wanted to go more into higher ed," Mendoza explained. This realization led him to adjunct positions as an instructor in English as a Second Language, where he saw his family members in the students he taught, but it was only part time. Concurrently, Mendoza was also involved in local government as a City Council member and later as Mayor, which allowed him to learn about policy and governance. This dual role of educator and elected official equipped him with a unique perspective on leadership and community service. Eventually, Mendoza took on the aforementioned Director of Workforce Education job that he had been passed up for after years of proving himself in a more junior position. That job led to a deanship in Workforce Education. Mendoza found that the Dean job, despite overseeing faculty and managing grants, was easier due to his previous experience and the skills he had developed in his previous role. This ease in his new position led him to seek out further challenges and opportunities for growth. Engaging in leadership roles at the state level further expanded Mendoza's influence and visibility in Washington higher education, allowing him to advocate for workforce education and engage with a broader network of educational professionals. At this point he began to get noticed and was soon tapped to be the Vice President of Instruction at yet another community college in his Northwestern home state. Ultimately, Mendoza's aspiration to lead at a higher level and his focus on representing and reflecting the students he served culminated in his current role as President of Cedar Trails

Community College. "Deep down, I knew I wanted to be at a Hispanic serving institution. I wanted to be at an institution where I could represent and reflect the students that I serve," he affirmed.

### *Familiarization with a New Institution*

**Initial Familiarization.** Before his final interview, President Mendoza personally visited the Cedar Trails Community College campus and the surrounding areas, including the nearby community satellite campus, to immerse himself in the environment and understand the local dynamics. "I wanted to represent and reflect the students that I served," he reiterated, a throughline in his motivation to lead. Mendoza did not stop at just visiting the campus; he actively sought out the perspectives of key community figures and educational leaders. "I came on a weekend before...to meet with the Chamber, meet with other folks," he recounted. This effort extended to engaging with the college's internal community, setting up meetings with the Associated Student Government (ASG) leadership, Academic Senate leadership, and classified staff even before officially starting his role. Due to his background as a former elected official, he understood the importance of establishing rapport with local and campus government bodies. "I went straight to a council meeting, I introduced myself, and I said as a former elected official," Mendoza shared. Upon his arrival, Mendoza's prior efforts paid dividends, making him a recognized figure on campus and in the community, but his work had just begun: "It took me a bit to do that, to assess...I did a lot of listening to acclimate, understand."

**Allies and Detractors.** President Mendoza has cultivated a network of faculty and staff allies who keep him informed, allowing him to prepare and respond effectively to various challenges. "I still have a few that feed me information," he noted. However, Mendoza also

acknowledged the presence of detractors from the start of his tenure, some of whom have opposed DEI initiatives. "There's always some…trying to persuade me in a direction, whether it's anti DEIA stuff, or not this, or not that, from the very beginning," he thought back. Nevertheless, Mendoza remained steady in his dedication to creating an inclusive environment. "I'm always vocal about that, though, we support every DEIA component," he asserted. The legal challenges faced by the college, particularly the lawsuit concerning the infusion of DEI into tenure evaluation, point to an ongoing battle within the institution. Several of the “six plaintiffs are from this college," Mendoza mentioned.

### *Critical Incident #1: From Center to College*

One of President Mendoza’s first points of order in the presidency was to transition Cedar Trails Community College Center to a fully accredited college. Hired specifically for this purpose, he faced the monumental task of navigating this process under the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges (ACCJC), while also managing a contentious relationship with Brayton College, the institution Cedar Trails was branching off from. Upon his arrival, Mendoza discovered the accreditation report heavily referenced Brayton College's practices, which required a quick and comprehensive addendum to demonstrate Cedar Trails’ independent capabilities. Brayton College, until then, had administrative oversight over Cedar Trails, implying a kind of ownership that challenged Cedar Trails’ push for independent college status. Mendoza reported a key moment when, recognizing a need for autonomy in order to successfully lead Cedar Trails towards independent accreditation, he secured a commitment from Chancellor Peabody. This agreement ensured that Mendoza would report directly to the Chancellor, like a President of a fully accredited college would, rather than to the President of Brayton College. Despite

this agreement, Mendoza noted resistance and lingering perceptions of subservience even among some of his own Vice Presidents and staff. They continued to have an entrenched view of Cedar Trails as a subsidiary of Brayton College.

Mendoza engaged in strategic outreach to ACCJC and the California State Chancellor's Office. He bargained for a semi-aggressive timeline to ensure that Cedar Trails' transition would be recognized and supported at both the state and accrediting levels. "I zeroed in on creating a relationship with them on a personal level, professional level, because our students needed that," Mendoza explained. The process was filled with internal and external skepticism, ranging from faculty who had moved to Cedar Trails for a quieter professional life, to community members pessimistic from years of alleged but unfulfilled promises of college status. Mendoza's persistence and direct communication with key figures like Chancellor Tinoco meant that, despite the hurdles, including the COVID-19 pandemic, Cedar Trails Community College achieved candidacy and full accreditation following a tight timeline to secure essential state funding dollars in the millions. Unfortunately, the victory was somewhat tempered when only a portion of the money ended up being allocated. "It's not like the district gave us the positions we needed once we separated," Mendoza shared. However, despite the challenges, successfully delivering the accreditation was a significant milestone in his presidency and in the college's history.

### *Critical Incident #2: COVID*

When COVID-19 first hit, President Mendoza needed to act swiftly and decisively, drawing from his emergency response experience as a Mayor. He called a collaborative meeting with local leaders, despite resistance and ego clashes from the Sheriff and public health officials. Mendoza proclaimed, "we need to get ahead of this." This proactive

leadership positioned him as a central figure in the local response to COVID. Nevertheless, the pandemic introduced divisions within the college community, with some faculty denying the seriousness of the disease and manipulating DEI rhetoric to express feelings of marginalization due to differing political views on the virus. Mendoza described a shift in the atmosphere from collaborative to divisive. In an attempt to address these challenges, he engaged in weekly, sometimes daily, discussions with the Department of Public Health and held frequent leadership team meetings to adapt to an ever-evolving situation. Mendoza also spearheaded plans to support students and faculty in transitioning to online learning and worked to provide access to necessary resources and accommodations for the wide-ranging needs of campus constituents.

In an effort to lead by example during the vaccine rollout, Mendoza shared a video of himself receiving the vaccination to encourage safety and trust in the community. He also made the bold decision to hold an in-person commencement ceremony, which was carefully planned with health guidelines in mind, to celebrate the student achievement and offer a semblance of normalcy. However, the ensuing vaccine mandate further complicated Mendoza's presidency by creating a rift among those opposed to and in favor of vaccination. The mandate also required the implementation of new systems for tracking vaccinations and testing, which added extra layers of complexity to campus operations and further strained staff morale.

As of these interviews, Cedar Trails Community College had not fully returned to pre-pandemic operations, with a large portion of classes still being offered online or in a hybrid format. Mendoza discussed the strategy of allowing students to choose between online and face-to-face classes based on their personal circumstances and preferences,

acknowledging that for many, the flexibility of online classes had been a major development, especially for those dealing with complex family or living situations. Mendoza also touched on the negotiations regarding telework policies for faculty and classified staff. Faculty negotiated the option to work up to 100% online, with presidential approval, while negotiations for classified staff have been ongoing and have become contentious. Mendoza wrestled with the difficulties of balancing the need for in-person administration with the desire of staff to continue teleworking despite a subsided pandemic. He expressed concern over the morale challenges that have arisen from the push to return to in-person work, especially among classified staff who feel that their needs and contributions are being overlooked in favor of returning to a "normal" that no longer exists.

***Critical Incident #3: The Bare Cabinet***

During the Summer and Fall of 2022, President Mendoza had a series of departures from his cabinet, which sparked a difficult period. The Vice President of Administrative Services left due to conflicts with another Vice President, followed soon after by the Director of Marketing Communications, who decided to move closer to home for a new opportunity, and a Dean of Career and Technical Education in STEM who left for a job in Hawaii. These public exits, happening alongside the loss of positions funded by federal and state stimulus dollars, created a narrative among detractors that campus employees were leaving due to dissatisfaction, prompting Mendoza to hold forums to address these rumors and reassure the college community. He explained the departures to them by stating, "this person left because they're closer to home, they got more money, and it's in the direction they want to go, this other person doubled their pay, they're in Hawaii, who wouldn't want to be there," in an attempt to counter the narrative that departures were due to negative working

conditions. But despite the valid reasons for staff leaving, Mendoza faced the added issue of not being able to directly address staffing issues that were controlled by the district due to existing state policy. Mendoza described this period as "the most challenging that I've had as a leader," compounded by the existing dissatisfaction from the push for staff to return to campus after COVID. He reflected on the personal toll it took, recognizing the need to not take things personally and to focus on the college's vision and students' needs. He determined, "I'm not going to take anything personal anymore, doesn't mean I'm not going to care. I just need to... bounce it off and say, hey, thanks." Mendoza also dealt with internal dynamics within his presidential cabinet, where some members were not fully supportive or communicative. This led Mendoza to demand solidarity from his team: "you're either going to support one another here and have my back when we need it, or when you need me, I'm going to step out of the way." In response, the dissent died out and his firm, authoritative approach helped navigate the college through that period of strain.

***Summary and Analysis***

President Mendoza's early years of labor in agricultural fields and navigating the educational system as a first-generation college student impacted his sense of perseverance and commitment to student success. On the pathway to the presidency, Mendoza overcame stereotyping and systemic barriers, which fueled his determination to lead and serve in an environment that mirrors the community he grew up in. In his efforts to get familiarized with Cedar Trails Community College, Mendoza took proactive steps to understand the campus and its surrounding areas, engaging with community leaders and campus constituents even before officially starting his role. This approach allowed for a smoother transition. Despite facing detractors, Mendoza's leadership continues to prioritize serving the

local community equitably. Through his leadership at Cedar Trails Community College, Mendoza embodies the principles of hard work, community engagement, and an unwavering belief in the power of education to change lives.

During the ambitious process of elevating Cedar Trails Community College Center to a fully independent community college, President Mendoza orchestrated a multifaceted strategy, weaving through bureaucratic challenges and political obstacles. Tasked with this mission upon appointment, Mendoza quickly identified the path to accreditation under the scrutiny of the ACCJC, while also untangling Cedar Trails' complex relationship with its former host institution, Brayton College. Mendoza negotiated a pivotal agreement with Chancellor Peabody, aligning his reporting directly with the Chancellor's office. This strategic move aimed to secure Cedar Trails' sovereignty. However, the path to accreditation was paved with skepticism from various quarters—faculty wary of change, community members jaded by previous unmet promises, and internal staff still operating under Brayton's shadow. Despite these barriers, Mendoza committed to direct engagement with accreditation bodies and state level community college officials. His approach to these crucial relationships, coupled with an aggressive timeline, showed a dedication to solidifying Cedar Trails' future and its students' success. These efforts led to Cedar Trails Community College attaining its desired independent status, a reflection of Mendoza's leadership and the collective will of its community. However, the triumph was bittersweet because promised funding and resource allocations fell short of expectations.

Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, President Mendoza summoned his emergency management abilities, honed during his mayoral tenure, to spearhead a joint community and campus response. This decisive action argues for his role as a unifying force. Despite initial

resistance from local leadership, Mendoza's clarion call for unity—"we need to get ahead of this"—cemented his leadership stance. However, the pandemic's grip fractured the collegial unity of the campus. Faculty members diverged on the pandemic's gravity, challenging Mendoza's efforts to maintain campus cohesion. In navigating the division, Mendoza's approach was multifaceted: fostering regular dialogue with health authorities, steering leadership teams through reflective decision-making, and pioneering an online transition for educational continuity. His personal vaccination, shared publicly, was a symbolic nod to collective safety and trust-building amid the contentious atmosphere brought on by vaccine mandates. These mandates, while aimed at keeping the people safe, inadvertently deepened campus divides, requiring complex tracking systems, and stirring debates on personal freedom versus community welfare. The persistence of hybrid educational models post-pandemic reflects Mendoza's acknowledgment of the evolving student and faculty needs. His policy allowing faculty the choice of online instruction, with his endorsement, alongside ongoing negotiations for classified staff remote work policies shows a shift towards flexibility. Mendoza's presidency, in the face of COVID-19 is an example of bureaucratic navigation, political maneuvering, and symbolic leadership, all while grappling with systemic and collegial dynamics. The transition to online learning, vaccine mandate implementation, and telework policy discussions encapsulate his adaptive and layered leadership amid unprecedented challenges.

In the Summer and Fall of 2022, President Mendoza found himself steering Cedar Trails Community College through choppy waters as he witnessed the departure of several key cabinet members. This exodus was not just a logistical problem, it became a focus for critics who suggested that these departures were indicative of broader dissatisfaction under

Mendoza's leadership. Faced with this challenge, Mendoza adopted a strategy that combined elements of collegiality, politics, and bureaucracy to stabilize the institution and address the rumors. Mendoza organized forums to directly communicate with the college community, providing transparent explanations for each departure. These forums were a collegial attempt to squash rumors and maintain morale, arguing that the reasons for the exits ranged from personal decisions to career advancements, rather than dissatisfaction with the college's leadership or environment. Politically, Mendoza was navigating a challenging landscape by attempting to counter a narrative that could potentially undermine confidence in his administration. His approach included candid discussions about the limitations he faced due to state policy and district-level decisions regarding staffing, pointing to the bureaucratic constraints within which he operated. Mendoza also demanded solidarity and support from his remaining cabinet, believing in the importance of a united front. This firm stance helped to reduce the dissent and showed Mendoza's team was aligned in their commitment to the college and its students. Through these actions, President Mendoza navigated Cedar Trails Community College through a tough period, utilizing a blend of collegial discussions, political acumen, and bureaucratic pragmatism to maintain stability and keep the college focused on its core mission of serving students.

Growing up in a migrant family and navigating challenges as a first-generation college student shaped President Mendoza’s dedication to educational equity. His strategic actions—from facilitating the college's transition to full accreditation to managing the impacts of COVID-19 and addressing staffing changes—show his ability to work through bureaucratic, political, and collegial issues effectively. Mendoza's proactiveness, community engagement and transparent communication stand out as key elements of his presidency.

Despite facing adversity, including staffing departures and the complexities introduced by the pandemic, his focus remained on creating a student-first environment and prioritizing the college's mission.

### Case 5: President Ryan Easton, Blue Sky College

> "Let's err on the side of making sure the students are served, that students have money to eat if they need…let's just do the right thing for students. The rest will take care of itself."
>
> (Easton, 2023)

#### *Pathway to Presidency*

**Family Background and Education.** President Easton's pathway to the presidency is characterized by perseverance in the face of adversity, family support, and the transformative impact of education. Born into a modest family, Easton's narrative is a relatable American story of aspiration and hard-won success. The son of an Air Force serviceman and a mother who juggled various jobs—from housekeeping to secretarial work—his upbringing was framed by a strong work ethic and a deep respect for education, values instilled by a determined grandmother. Described as a migrant farmer who traversed Texas picking cotton until the eighth grade, Easton's grandmother's decision to leave farming behind and pursue regular employment, despite the meager earnings of putting lids on ice cream for a dollar a week, set a new course for her family's future. Her experiences illustrate the limitations imposed by a lack of formal education, a lesson she passed down to Easton through generations. His educational path was shaped by these family narratives. As a first-generation college student, he embarked on his academic journey at a Southern community college, before transferring to a Southern public university for his undergraduate studies. This phase of his life was marked by a lack of direction and understanding of how to

navigate the complexities of university life, reflecting the challenges faced by many first-generation college students. Despite these initial struggles, President Easton's commitment to education deepened. He pursued a master's degree in administration while teaching, motivated by a school district policy that offered to finance graduate education for its teachers. This opportunity not only reinforced his belief in lifelong learning but also paved the way for his doctoral studies at a Western public university, focusing on the resegregation of public schools. Although he humbly admits to not being an exemplary doctoral student, his dedication to addressing systemic issues in education foreshadows a career-long commitment to making a difference through his leadership.

**Mentors.** One significant figure in President Easton's development was Harriet Burns, the Chancellor of a Bay Area community college district. Burns extended an invitation to Easton to attend the Seedlings Symposium, an event designed to support and evaluate the potential of CEOs facing challenges and to provide essential training for new CEOs. This symposium represented a turning point for Easton, exposing him to a broader network of experienced CEOs and served as a major turning point in his ascent within the educational leadership community. The symposium and the support from Burns and other CEOs played a crucial role in Easton securing his next professional opportunity. It also emphasizes the importance of external mentoring and the impact that a community of leaders can have on an individual's career. Reflecting on his journey, Easton now sees the importance of paying forward the mentorship and support he received. He actively participates in providing guidance to younger CEOs facing challenges, embodying the cycle of mentorship that once played a crucial role in his own development. As President Easton sees it, nurturing future

leaders not only enriches the educational community but also ensures the perpetuation of effective, empathetic leadership in the sector.

**Challenges, Obstacles and Complications.** One of the earliest challenges Easton encountered was stepping into the role of a CFO during a particularly stressful period at a small college in the West. This experience was thrust upon him unexpectedly when the college's CFO took a stress-induced leave at the end of the fiscal year, a critical time for financial oversight in any educational institution. This situation demanded Easton to quickly adapt and manage financial responsibilities, a task that his previous roles had not explicitly prepared him for. The mentorship and trust placed in him by that college president during this time were instrumental in navigating these challenges and directly informed his hands-on approach to leadership. Later in his career during his first presidency at Las Politicas College, Easton was confronted with a different set of challenges, marked by ethical dilemmas, volatile political dynamics, and administrative conflicts. He described an environment where questionable ethical practices were seemingly normalized, a scenario that culminated in his vocal opposition to deceptive financial practices. "I remember getting in trouble once because... I contradicted our CFO at a public meeting," Easton shared. His experience at Las Politicas was steeped in personal and professional challenges, characterized by "a lot of sleepless nights" and concerns over his career and family's future. Easton decided to leave that environment and seek out a presidency at a different institution after facing what he considered to be unjust consequences for his actions. This challenging period provided valuable leadership insights, especially the importance of allowing time for others to understand and align with his vision. "You gotta let people catch up... give them

time to ask the really basic questions to figure that out," Easton reflected, emphasizing the need for patience and inclusivity in leading campus constituents through change.

**Professional Roles and Inspirations.** Starting his career as a first-generation college graduate, Easton's initial foray into education as a vocation saw him in the role of teacher. "That's kind of what first-generation college students do—they get jobs as teachers," Easton observed, reflecting on the early days of his career. Later on, during his doctoral program he made the transition from the classroom to the complexities of state government and legislative analysis through a serendipitous opportunity that came his way. "One of my professors came... he says, 'Hey, [there's] a job opening up as a legislative analyst, it's in the legislature,'" Easton recalled, his curiosity piqued by a role that was foreign yet intriguing. This stint in state government not only honed his skills in policy analysis but also ignited his interest in higher education administration.

President Easton's first taste of higher education administration started with his work for the Board of Regents in a Western state. After a long assignment in the aforementioned small Western college as an emergency institutional accountant, he then took a job in the Mid Atlantic as Chief Administrative Officer for the state higher education policy commission and the community technical college system. This role placed him at the nexus of higher education administration and policy, overseeing staff for both agencies and reporting directly to both Chancellors. Despite the potential for conflict in such a dual reporting structure, Easton found the experience to be surprisingly manageable, thanks to a cooperative environment and positive relationships among key stakeholders. "The two Chancellors got along. We all got along... it was not as big a mess as you might think it would be," he recounted. However, Easton's experience in the Mid Atlantic was not without

its challenges. He vividly described the political climate under Governor John Cottage, noting the intense and often intrusive nature of Cottage's involvement in state government. "John Cottage is…not a nice man," Easton candidly shared. The governor was known to micromanage and exert pressure on state officials, even to the point of calling Easton's boss at two in the morning to express discontent. He soon realized he needed to get out of that situation, which eventually led to his first presidency at Las Politicas College, an institution that also turned out to be a toxic work environment. Throughout these roles, Easton was inspired by the leaders he encountered—some who exemplified effective leadership qualities and others whose actions served as cautionary tales.

### *Familiarization with a New Institution*

**Initial Familiarization.** Upon arriving at Blue Sky College, President Easton embarked on an intense process of familiarization and adaptation, drawing extensively from his background in higher education and the significant challenges he faced in the Mid-Atlantic and Las Politicas College. Easton's approach to familiarizing himself with Blue Sky College involved understanding the institution's culture, operations, and community impact. Recognizing the importance of building relationships, he prioritized engagement with faculty, staff, students, and the wider community to gain a comprehensive perspective on the college's strengths, areas for improvement, and the broader expectations of its stakeholders. This engagement process was not merely about acclimation but also about establishing trust and open lines of communication. In addition to personal interactions, Easton dedicated time to analyzing the college's academic programs, administrative structures, financial health, and strategic plans. His experience in state government and higher education policy, particularly in budgeting and policy analysis, enabled him to scrutinize Blue Sky College's operations

with a sharp eye. President Easton's background taught him the significance of financial stewardship and strategic planning in achieving long-term institutional goals and stability. In navigating the familiarization process, Easton also leveraged his insights into the complexities of state government and higher education policies. This knowledge was instrumental in fostering productive relationships with external stakeholders, including local and state government officials, ensuring that Blue Sky College remained well-positioned to advocate for its interests and secure necessary resources. Through this comprehensive familiarization process, Easton not only acclimated to his new role but also laid the groundwork for a visionary leadership approach aimed at advancing the college's mission and impact in the years to come.

**Allies and Detractors.** A pivotal ally in President Easton's circle was the Board Chair. "Our board chair had been on the board for, at that time, 20 years... He was very helpful and very well respected by the college community... the fact that Gary had my back went a long way," Easton reflected, highlighting the significant impact of having such a respected figure's support within the college community. Similarly, the CFO, who had also served as the Interim President, extended her tenure to assist Easton. He appreciated her support, noting, "she was going to retire but stayed an extra year... she just wanted to help the college and help me get transitioned." In the realm of academic leadership, Easton built constructive relationships with successive Academic Senate Presidents. These connections were vital for fostering open dialogue and mutual respect, even in instances of disagreement. Easton recalled, "Herb was really good... we got along really well and were able to have good conversations... we didn't always see eye to eye but... it was nice to have that relationship…[and] actually build some trust." By leveraging support from key figures, and

fostering an environment of trust and open communication, President Easton was able to navigate the complexities of his role with success.

**Campus Culture.** The campus culture at Blue Sky College is best described as collegial and feisty. This atmosphere is characterized by a strong sense of unity and pride among the various departments, with faculty and staff readily rallying in defense of their own, even amidst internal disagreements. This protective nature, however, does not hinder the college's ability to come together for common goals. President Easton explains, "You can go in any department, and they're going to fight for their people... But when something needs to get done, the college kind of rallies around it." Despite initial resistance to change, with faculty humorously adopting a "Hell, no, we're not doing that" stance, the college has demonstrated an impressive capacity for adaptation and achievement over the past decade. Easton notes the speed the college moves projects forward compared to the protracted processes seen elsewhere. "Most things don't take five years to drag out like they do at a lot of colleges, we're usually pretty good about keeping things moving," he observed, attributing part of this success to a well-functioning shared governance system. Significant improvements in the shared governance system were made under Easton’s leadership, particularly in streamlining the decision-making process to avoid unnecessary red tape and redundancy. He and Herb, the Academic Senate President, addressed past inefficiencies where proposals were nitpicked and stalled, advocating for a more trust-based approach. "When it gets to us it should be pretty much a rubber stamp," Easton said.

At the heart of Blue Sky College's culture is a commitment to doing what is right for students, fostering an environment where staff feel empowered to make decisions in students' best interests, even at the risk of making mistakes. This approach is embodied in

Easton's student support philosophy: "I feel like we've got a campus that knows, if I do the right thing for a student, I'm not going to get in trouble... let's err on the side of making sure the students are served." Easton also addresses the importance of patience and constructive criticism within the campus culture, recognizing the value of direct communication in resolving conflicts and misunderstandings. He describes engaging with dissenting voices in a manner that encourages more productive outcomes, illustrating a leadership style that prioritizes dialogue and understanding over confrontation. Ultimately, the campus culture under President Easton reflects a community that is proud, efficient, and responsive to the needs of its members.

***Perspective on HSI Status***

At Blue Sky College, President Easton has embraced its designation as an HSI, recognizing the transformative potential of HSI grants not only for Latino students but for the entire college community. "The cool part about being an HSI...is that you get these grants, and it helps the whole institution," Easton explained. Under his leadership, the college has initiated a more inclusive examination of student representation and participation, questioning, and addressing disparities to ensure student leadership roles reflect the diverse student body. "Before I got here, the college didn't stop and ask, Why is our student body 50% Latino, but none of our student officers are Latino?" Easton recounted. Through initiatives like PUENTE and other support programs, the college aims to offer comprehensive resources to its students, acknowledging the particular challenges faced by certain demographics, including Latino students. Easton's recounting of Vincent Alvaros's story from a struggling student to pursuing higher education at an elite East Coast

private university exemplifies the transformative power of supportive educational environments.

Easton also discussed the delicate balance required to navigate the community's political landscape while advancing the college's mission. By framing initiatives in terms of removing barriers and changing odds for the entire community, he has successfully communicated the value and necessity of the college's efforts to a local owner and donor class that has been historically conservative. This strategic communication has been crucial in garnering support for initiatives aimed at improving outcomes for Latino students and the wider student body alike. Recognizing his own journey as a working-class, first-generation college student, Easton is mindful of the additional hurdles faced by students of color and is dedicated to building systems that support their success. Through strategic use of HSI grants, intentional leadership, and a steadfast commitment to equity and inclusion, President Easton has steered Blue Sky College toward a future where every student has the opportunity to thrive, regardless of their background.

### *Critical Incident #1: Las Politicas*

During the critical period of 2011-2013, as the fiscal constraints of the recession began to lift, President Easton embarked on his first college presidency. His time at Las Politicas College taught him to better interpret the importance of discerning unspoken cues and indirect communications in a politically fraught environment. "I hadn't considered what was going to be needed to navigate the politics of that district," Easton admitted, reflecting on early missteps and misinterpretations. The challenges escalated during the hiring process for the Vice President for Student Services, revealing the depths of the district's political dynamics. Despite assurances of an open search, a preferred candidate emerged from the

Chancellor's circle, challenging Easton's commitment to merit-based selection. "The Chancellor…wouldn't let me take my choice to the board," he recalled. This period was marked not only by confrontations over hiring decisions but also by the broader implications of political maneuvering on budget cuts and layoffs. The realization dawned on Easton that being the face of the college's decisions came with the responsibility to ensure the leadership team's engagement in these processes. "You really need your team around you," he learned, recognizing the value of unified cabinet support in navigating fiscal austerity and political scrutiny. Reflecting on the lessons learned from navigating the political landscape of Las Politicas College, President Easton acknowledged the necessity of political acumen, and the importance of patience and inclusivity in leadership. "I wasn't treated fairly there. But I also poured gas on the fire," Easton confessed. Once he made the jump to the presidency at Blue Sky College, the experiences and insights Easton gained from the challenges at Las Politicas informed his approach in future predicaments.

***Critical Incident #2: The Rogue Trustee***

One of the most turbulent episodes in President Easton's tenure at Blue Sky College was the saga involving a rogue trustee, a tale that encapsulates the challenges and complexities of shared governance in educational institutions. The precursor to this turmoil was the disciplinary action taken against the Campus Police Chief, which led to unforeseen consequences. The officer in question had been a source of numerous complaints, displaying behavior that starkly contrasted with his role. His actions ranged from aggressive confrontations with civilians to misinterpretations of campus policies, notably an incident involving the unwarranted expulsion of a community member walking her dog on campus grounds. The Police Chief was eventually fired, but a separate police officer he had hired

was also having issues. Under the assumption that the issues were attributed to the terminated Police Chief, the police officer's probation period was extended, a decision that would later become a point of contention. The situation escalated when the police officer's dismissal was challenged on legal grounds, claiming that the extension of her probation was illegitimate. Amidst this controversy, her boyfriend, a part-time employee at the college, took offense to the administration's actions. In a dramatic response, this boyfriend launched a campaign to get elected to the college's Board of Trustees, spending an unprecedented $20,000 in the process. His campaign was marked by promises of upheaval, including the dismissal of key college administrators, among them President Easton.

Upon his election, the rogue trustee embarked on a campaign of disruption, challenging administrative decisions, and fostering a climate of intimidation and discord. His actions prompted concerns for safety and professionalism within the college community, leading to requests for police presence during board meetings and causing significant stress among faculty and staff. His tenure was characterized by attempts to undermine the administration, including making veiled threats and inappropriate comments. In a decisive move to counteract the trustee's disruptive influence, President Easton proposed a resolution to the Board of Trustees. This resolution aimed to censure the rogue trustee, affirm support for the college's administration, and extend Easton's contract, thereby demonstrating the board's united front against the trustee's antagonistic behavior. At the time, he had a scheduled interview for another community college presidency and offered them an ultimatum: "I need you to pass this resolution. And if you do, I will drop out of the interview. If you don't, I'm going to the interview. And…I'm not stopping…if i get the job I'm going". The board's response was strategic; they adopted measures to isolate the rogue

trustee from sensitive discussions and decisions, effectively neutralizing his attempts to sow discord. This period of conflict highlighted the importance of solid leadership and the ability of the board and administration to collaborate closely in navigating crises. The resolution, while not explicitly labeled as a censure, was interpreted as such by the public and served as a symbolic gesture of the board's disapproval of the trustee's actions. The rogue trustee's term eventually ended without him achieving his disruptive objectives, thanks in part to the concerted efforts of President Easton and the board.

***Critical Incident #3: The Promise Program***

Amid a growing trend among community colleges to offer free education initiatives, President Easton faced a challenging dilemma. The concept of a "Promise Program" — free education for the first year or more — was emerging as an effective approach to increase access to higher education. However, Easton was concerned with the financial implications and sustainability of such a program. As neighboring colleges unveiled their own versions of the Promise Program, fueled by significant donations and community support, the pressure mounted for Blue Sky College to follow suit. The inception of Blue Sky College's Promise Program was not a tale of immediate action but one of careful planning and resourceful restructuring. With an understanding that "we don't want to call something a promise and then five years down the road, we run out of money and we can't do it," Easton recalled. This approach led to the restructuring of the college's administrative framework, combining the Public Affairs and Foundation departments into a unified College Advancement Division. This strategic move was not just about administrative efficiency; it was about laying the groundwork for a sustainable Promise Program. The drive to establish the Promise Program began to look like an eventuality with the involvement of Bank of the

Coast, which contributed the first million dollars towards the initiative. This initial funding was a pivotal moment, signaling the transition from concept to actionable plan.

With funding in place, the college embarked on an ambitious journey to not only offer the first year of college for free but to weave the Promise Program into the fabric of the community. Outreach efforts extended beyond high school juniors, reaching into middle and elementary schools, with a clear message: "you're going to be a Wolf when you grow up." This comprehensive approach aimed to instill a college-going culture from an early age, ensuring that the Promise Program was more than just financial support. The outcomes speak volumes. Increased enrollment from local high schools, record graduation numbers, and a profound impact on the community illustrate the transformative power of the Promise Program. Under Easton's leadership, Blue Sky College not only avoided unfulfilled promises but established a model of sustainable support that promises to benefit students for generations to come.

***Summary and Analysis***

President Easton champions a philosophy that prioritizes student welfare and success above all, reflecting his upbringing in a modest family and his journey as a first-generation college student. His career began with teaching and then shifted into higher education administration, where he gained important experience and key insights from positions in the West and Mid Atlantic. These roles exposed him to policy, governance, and the political landscapes often typical in higher education. Upon assuming his presidency at Blue Sky College, Easton sought to understand and integrate into the campus culture, engaging with faculty, students, and community leaders. The college's shared governance system has been streamlined under Easton’s guidance, emphasizing efficiency and empowering staff to act

decisively in students' best interests. A significant challenge in Easton's tenure was balancing the college's role as an HSI with the more conservative local community's perspectives. Through strategic framing and communication, he has effectively advocated for the benefits of HSI initiatives not only for Latino students but for the entire college community. Easton's leadership narrative is one of unwavering commitment to doing right by students.

During his first presidency at Las Politicas College in the aftermath of the Great Recession, President Easton encountered a steep learning curve regarding the game of institutional politics. This period taught Easton the necessity of understanding both the explicit and implicit signals within a college's political environment. "The political dimension of that district was something I hadn't fully appreciated," Easton confessed. The process of appointing a Vice President for Student Services was a prime example of the politics at play. Easton faced direct opposition from the Chancellor, who preferred a different candidate and made it known, gumming up the selection process. His experiences at Las Politicas also impacted his approach to leadership, showing him the importance of a supportive and cohesive leadership team when facing political and fiscal challenges, and allowing his cabinet to "catch up" to his vision and plans. Ultimately, Easton left that presidency equipped with clearer perspectives on political realities, the significance of collaborative leadership, and the value of patience and support in steering a college.

President Easton's second critical incident revolved around a contentious figure—a trustee with a personal vendetta, stemming from the disciplinary actions against campus police personnel. One of the involved officers' partner, motivated by grievance and equipped with a substantial campaign budget, secured a position on the college's Board of

Trustees. His time in the position was filled with attempts to overturn administrative decisions, explicitly targeting Easton and others under the guise of institutional reform. The college went through a period of unease, with board meetings requiring police presence due to the confrontational atmosphere and the trustee's aggression. Easton, recognizing the threat to the college's stability, sought to censure the rogue trustee through a board resolution—a move that symbolized the administration and board's collective stance against the disruptive influence. The trustee's attempts to destabilize the administration were halted and he was rendered powerless for the remainder of his term. The resolution of this incident—evidence of the systemic, collegial, and political organizational behaviors at play—points to the resilience of shared governance structures and the role of leadership in maintaining institutional integrity. Through strategic maneuvering and a focus on the college's mission, Easton and the board show the strength of collaboration in the face of individual discord.

In the initiative to launch the "Promise Program" at Blue Sky College, President Easton prioritized both the program's immediate impact and its long-term viability. Amid a national push towards offering free community college education, Easton was concerned with the potential financial strain such programs could place on institutions without the necessary operating funds. While neighboring colleges quickly embraced the trend, some through major financial donations, Easton chose a path of deliberate planning and careful consideration of resources. To guarantee sustainability of the Promise Program, he reorganized the college's administrative structure. By merging the Public Affairs and Foundation departments into the new College Advancement Division, Easton laid a foundation for more focused fundraising and community engagement. This move represents bureaucratic and collegial efforts through his bold executive leadership, strategic delegation

of tasks and the encouragement of a collaborative environment to support a shared goal. The political, symbolic, and systemic dimensions of organizational behavior were also evident in Easton's approach. Politically, he negotiated the pressures of matching community expectations with a realistic program design, securing the Promise Program's first significant donation from Bank of the Coast—a pivotal $1 million contribution. This act was symbolic by showing the community's investment in education and signaling the program's potential to transform lives. Systemically, Easton and his team revised policies and processes to extend the promise of free education beyond just high school seniors, reaching back into middle and elementary schools to offer a clear pathway to Blue Sky College. The Promise Program's success—evident by rising enrollment and graduation rates—is an example of how community colleges can offer transformative opportunities while maintaining financial responsibility and operational sustainability.

President Easton has navigated through major challenges at Blue Sky but has remained focused on supporting student success. Drawing from his own journey as a first-generation college student, Easton has aimed to create accessible educational opportunities for all. His experiences at Las Politicas College and with a disruptive trustee at Hancock offer a glimpse at the institutional politics and leadership challenges typical in the college presidency, but also speaks to the value in a united front. The implementation of the Promise Program showcases Easton's pragmatic approach to sustainable, equitable educational initiatives. Easton reflections here provide key examples of a consistent dedication to transforming the lives of students through education.

**Case 6: President Nico Tolentino, Panorama College**

“If we have confidence in terms of who we are, and we bring our ancestors into our own work and leadership and to the space of work that we do, it's hard to get lost, because your compass is so strong” (Tolentino, 2023)

### *Pathway to Presidency*

**Family Background and Education.** Immigrating from the Philippines to the United States at the age of 15, President Tolentino grew up with parents who were "educators in their own way," with his mother working in a public school and his father teaching English at military bases. Family influences initially guided him toward a career in health, reflecting a common aspiration among immigrants. He recounted, "I didn't have any question in my mind that I was going [into]...medicine or dental school." Pursuing science courses at an East Bay Area community college and majoring in Biology upon transferring, Tolentino was on track to achieve his health sector ambitions. However, the societal upheaval following the Rodney King beating in 1991 profoundly impacted him, stirring an interest in activism and organizing while still at a West Bay Area public university. While Tolentino "still graduated with his Biology degree," his interests and professional opportunities would eventually pull him away from the health field and towards educational leadership. He would later earn a master’s degree in Public Administration from an East Bay Area public university before eventually returning to his alma mater in the West Bay Area to earn a doctorate in Educational Leadership.

**Mentors.** A memorable individual for President Tolentino was Ali Adebayo, a student whose boldness and negotiation skills left a lasting impression on him. Recounting their first meeting during an Upward Bound student recruiting event, Tolentino shared, "[Ali] was like, this old soul, right?... He said, I'm only going to take [the spot] if you hire my English

teacher for a summer gig...this dude is negotiating with me!" This encounter not only demonstrated the power of Ali's personality but also led to a key introduction to Jim Hoyt Hernandez, currently a Raza Studies instructor at a West Bay Area public university, who would go on to become a significant part of Tolentino's professional and personal life. This introduction eventually led to the formation of the so-called "Tribal Heads," a group of young, ambitious high school educators including Tolentino, Hernandez, Bert Mendota, and Han Wang. These relationships, built on mutual support and a shared mission in education, have been enduring, "We're all in education. So, we kind of support each other in that way," Tolentino reflected.

Tim Gonzalez, another influential mentor, offered guidance and opportunities that propelled Tolentino's career forward. Tolentino notes Gonzalez' impact, stating, "He didn't even know he was mentoring me, but I was always calling him... He was always open to just listening and coaching me however he can." Additionally, Tolentino's involvement in the formation of The Coalition provided a platform for collective action and mentorship. The Coalition is a collaborative effort among three organizations: the African American Male Education Network and Development (A2MEND), Asian Pacific Americans in Higher Education (APAHE), and California Community College Organizacion de Latinx Empowerment Guidance & Advocacy for Success (COLEGAS). The coalition's encouragement and belief in Tolentino's capabilities played a major role in his decision to pursue higher level leadership roles, "It's more responsibility, right? It's like, you need to step into that role... rather than questioning yourself, it was like, a confidence booster."

**Challenges, Obstacles and Complications.** Recalling the early days of his career, President Tolentino faced discrimination that could have deterred a less determined individual. "I

remember my very first full-time job evaluation, one of the critiques of the individuals is that I did not speak English well, therefore, how am I supposed to be working with students," he shared, highlighting the microaggressions that young professionals of color often experience. This incident sowed seeds of self-doubt, introducing Tolentino to what he would later recognize as imposter syndrome. Another significant challenge occurred at an East Bay Area community college while working on a project aimed at addressing social justice through a hip-hop conference. Tolentino and a colleague were accused of being racist by their White superiors, a baseless claim that left them feeling isolated and vulnerable. "We were the only two folks of color. And we were called racist in that space," Tolentino recalled. However, the most personal and profound challenge came with the passing of his wife in 2019. During this period of immense personal loss, Tolentino felt a lack of empathy from his institution, and from a supervisor that pressured him to return to work prematurely. "The President at that moment was like, 'When are you coming back to work, when are you coming back to work, when are you coming back to work,'" he recounted, highlighting a moment when the need for humanizing institutions became personally significant. Despite these obstacles, Tolentino remained steadfast in his values and mission. "It caused barriers. But the work is not that difficult when your heart is in the right place," he reflected.

**Professional Roles and Inspirations.** After graduating amidst the aforementioned Rodney King social upheaval, Tolentino's career veered into education, initially through after-school programs in the East Bay Area. "I started doing after-school work [across the East Bay Area]" he reflected. This was the beginning of Tolentino’s dedication to serving underrepresented students. His work led him to various roles within the education sector, including significant positions at an elite East Bay public university and a religious East Bay

Area private university, and eventually the California community college system. "After…eight years of doing four-year institutional work, I got exposed to community college work and I've never turned back since," Tolentino stated. This transition was encouraged by his desire to work with a more diverse student population, reflecting on his community college roots, "I really wanted to be doing community college work." Tolentino's rise through the ranks was not the result of a calculated plan but rather the natural outcome of his dedication and impactful work. "Everything was because somebody just said, 'We're loving your work, you should apply for this job,'" he recounted. His approach to leadership is driven by a desire to effect systemic change and a personal understanding of the communities he serves. "I knew what I can bring to the institution," Tolentino shared. As he stepped into the acting presidency at Panorama College, Tolentino did so with a clear vision for the institution, inspired by its history of innovation and commitment to equity. "The existence of the oldest Filipino learning community was birthed out of Panorama, [and] the progressive work that they're doing in terms of developing and being in student services," Tolentino explained.

### *Familiarization with a New Institution*

**Initial Familiarization.** When President Tolentino first took on the role of Interim President at Panorama College, he recognized the importance of engaging beyond the realm of his previous role as Vice President of Student Services, stating, "to be efficient and effective in the role of presidency, you need to immerse yourself in more aspects of the institution." To this end, Tolentino dedicated time to connect with key groups within the college, including the Academic Senate leadership, to grasp their priorities and challenges. His commitment to inclusivity was further demonstrated through regular meetings with various student groups.

These encounters, Tolentino noted, were informative and revealed a universal desire among students for a sense of community, even though the definition of community looked different across groups. Tolentino's efforts to familiarize himself with Panorama also extended to his cabinet, understanding that their collaboration is crucial for the institution's success. However, Tolentino pointed to the dynamic nature of educational leadership, asserting that true familiarity with an institution requires continuous engagement with its evolving community. "You will never fully familiarize yourself," he reflected.

**Campus Culture.** At Panorama College, the campus culture is marked by a spirit of innovation and mutual support, characteristics President Tolentino both praises and critiques for their dual-edged effects. He observed, "It's innovative...But then it's also the very same reasons where people are also saying, we're tired." The culture of innovation, while a draw for Tolentino and many others, now faces the challenge of sustaining energy and enthusiasm in a community still reeling from recent global events. The pandemic in particular impacted the sense of community at Panorama, with Tolentino noting a shift: "pre-pandemic, there was a stronger sense of community; post-pandemic, it just started to divide people." He argued for the need to rebuild the campus community in new ways that reflect current realities. Further, Tolentino seeks a culture of critical engagement alongside supportiveness. "We're moving into spaces where we also need to be critical of each other, and not just collegial," he pointed out, highlighting the importance of honest conversations to advance Panorama's goal of becoming an anti-racist institution.

### *Perspective on HSI Status*

Upon his arrival, President Tolentino was struck by the limited scope of HSI programming at Panorama College, noting, "rather than the comprehensive support of

student services to our HSI, it really surrounded more around counseling." This observation led him to question the depth of the college's plans to truly serve its Latino population, despite having the HSI designation and funding in place. Tolentino reflected, "we were a designated HSI. But we couldn't authentically say that we were also a Latino serving institution." This distinction between being merely designated as an HSI and actively serving the Latino community is a focal point of Tolentino's efforts to foster a more inclusive and supportive environment. He urged the college community to "adapt more the Latino serving institution mindset," indicating a desire to extend beyond the confines of grant requirements to genuinely meet the needs of Latino students. The tension between being designated as an HSI and effectively serving Latino students is further complicated by funding constraints and program focus. Tolentino pointed out the irony in the potential loss of HSI funding, questioning, "Does that mean we don't serve Latinos?" He challenged the college to maintain its commitment to serving Latino students irrespective of the availability of specific HSI funding. Drawing on his experiences from a previous community college, Tolentino spoke on the debate between serving all students and specifically targeting support towards Latino students. He advocates for a focused approach through equity initiatives, rather than diluting efforts by attempting to serve all equally. This strategy, Tolentino argued, will strengthen Panorama College's position to better prepare it for future funding cycles and opportunities and, more importantly, fulfilling its responsibility to its Latino student population.

### *Critical Incident #1: The Israel-Palestine Conflict*

In the early weeks of the Israel-Palestine conflict, President Tolentino grappled with the challenge of maintaining neutrality while addressing the complexities of the situation in

his campus communications. The district's stance was to remain neutral, a directive that stemmed from the broader context of lawsuits against institutions committed to diversity, equity, and inclusivity. Tolentino explained, "the message from our district was, we stay neutral, and we're not taking sides." However, he also recognized that, "we just cannot afford to surrender our humanity" during this trying time. The conflict manifested on campus when a student expressed their political views on a whiteboard in a STEM area. Tolentino assessed the situation, finding the content neither anti-Semitic nor hate speech. He reasoned, "there's nothing wrong with the student writing that. But if the students then need to use it for their academics, erase what's written on the board, and then use it for the purpose that's needed." This action led to a misunderstanding, as a Dean's decision to remove the whiteboards was misconstrued as an attempt by the President (Tolentino) to suppress student voice.

Tolentino addressed this misunderstanding directly, emphasizing the need for dialogue and clarity. He proposed, "what I wanted to also do so I can clarify that is, we have a division of faculty who wrote the sentiment to the Academic Senate…[and] I wanted to open the space of conversation and dialogue with them." Through this approach, Tolentino aimed to foster a community that could engage in difficult conversations constructively. Tolentino's stance on neutrality was nuanced. He believed that while the district advocated for neutrality, there was an inherent contradiction in the values of an educational institution that commits to anti-racism and diversity, equity, and inclusion. "The minute that you take that on as a personal commitment, and also as a professional, you can't be neutral in that space," Tolentino asserted. He challenged the notion of neutrality by advocating for active engagement and leadership, steering clear of what Tolentino termed "absent leadership." His

approach during the (still ongoing) Israel-Palestine conflict is a strong example of the complexities of navigating political sensitivities within educational institutions, especially an issue that divides traditional political alliances. Tolentino strived to maintain the college's commitment to diversity and inclusivity while managing the dynamics of neutrality, but ultimately viewed this instance as a “lose-lose situation.”

### *Critical Incident #2: The Neighbor’s Gun*

In facing a critical incident where a neighbor brandished a gun near Panorama College, President Tolentino encountered challenges that tested the institution's response mechanisms and the community's trust in leadership. Tolentino shared, "at the start of the term we had a neighbor who pulled a gun up to our employees," leading to a situation loaded with anxiety and questioning of the college's safety protocols. Despite the local police deciding not to mandate a shelter in place due to the perceived distance of the threat from classrooms, the decision faced criticism within the campus community. Faculty members voiced concerns, questioning, "why didn't we do shelter in place," highlighting a divide between administrative decisions and faculty expectations. Tolentino emphasized the importance of communication and procedural clarity in restoring trust. "We invested the time...and I think we still need a little more work to do," he remarked, acknowledging the ongoing effort required to align community expectations with safety protocols. The incident prompted a reevaluation of public safety roles, especially given Panorama's choice of employing public safety officers over sworn police officers, a decision rooted in a nearly decade-old community stance against guns on campus.

The event led to the development of "four levels of urgent matters" for communication about safety incidents, aiming to set clear expectations for the college

community. Tolentino's leadership looked to balance the integrity of campus security measures with the community's need for transparency and reassurance. Further, the incident uncovered a broader issue of navigating "blue culture" and the community's wariness and distrust of law enforcement officials. Tolentino advocated for a shift towards a service-oriented approach, emphasizing the need for "intentional training" and community education to foster a mutual understanding of safety roles and responsibilities. Throughout this critical incident, President Tolentino planned for how future incidents might be handled differently, considering improvements in early communication and a more proactive engagement with local law enforcement to make informed decisions collaboratively and in conjunction with community members and campus constituents alike.

### *Critical Incident #3: HSI Funding Fumble*

In this critical incident at Panorama College, President Tolentino encountered significant challenges related to the sustainability and effectiveness of a faculty-led, STEM-focused HSI grant. The recent lapse in the HSI grant, as President Tolentino analyzed, was due to a combination of leadership transitions and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to a missed grant deadline and a dropped opportunity to reapply for the next cycle of federal funding. Reflecting on this, Tolentino said, "We never knew how to really nurture and cultivate the sustainability of an HSI grant." This funding fumble led to a critical examination of how the institution approaches equity grants, underlining the need for a systemic and integrated approach rather than isolated efforts. Leveraging discretionary funds, Tolentino boldly addressed these challenges through institutionalizing key positions funded by the grant into permanent roles and developing a process for managing and applying for federal minority-serving institution grants as a collective institutional

responsibility going forward. "One of the exercise that we're doing now...is we want to look at all those MSIs, federal minority serving institution grants...and understand when do we go for them?" he explained, signaling a shift towards a more intentional approach to securing equity initiatives with less opportunities for the grant application to fall through the cracks. Tolentino remarked on the importance of not just increasing numbers for Latinos and other students but changing the conditions and mindsets that perpetuate the disparities in the first place. Ultimately, President Tolentino learned from this experience the importance of not just securing additional resources but also being clear on why these funds are pursued and the specific conditions they aim to change.

***Summary and Analysis***

President Tolentino migrated from the Philippines at 15, and his formative years were shaped by his parents, both educators in their own way, which set him on a path initially aimed towards health sciences. However, societal events, such as the Rodney King beating, and a passion for activism pushed him towards educational leadership, a field where he has made significant impacts. Tolentino's professional growth has been supported by influential mentors and powerful peer groups like the “Tribal Heads”. Despite encountering challenges such as discrimination and the tragic loss of his wife, Tolentino's resolve remains unshaken, fueled by a strong belief in the transformative power of education. At Panorama College, Tolentino stepped into the interim presidency with a vision of institutional innovation, community engagement, and a focus on serving underrepresented students. He has made efforts to enhance Panorama College's role as an HSI, pushing for a more comprehensive approach to serving its Latino population beyond just the designation itself. He advocates for targeted support and initiatives to address the specific needs of Latino

students. President Tolentino exemplifies leadership grounded in empathy, perseverance, and a sense of urgency.

In confronting the early stages of the Israel-Palestine conflict's impact on campus life, President Tolentino found himself at the intersection of administrative neutrality and a personal pull to uphold humanity. The district's policy mandated a neutral stance, an order that was at odds with his principles of speaking truth to power. This tension was tested when a student's political expression on a whiteboard sparked controversy, leading to a misunderstanding attributed to Tolentino's decision-making. He responded by insisting on open dialogue in an attempt to facilitate understanding and compassion among campus stakeholders. Tolentino argued for the campus's role in thoughtful engagement with complex issues, advocating for a culture where difficult conversations can occur. Through this incident, Tolentino exhibited political, collegial, and symbolic organizational behavior. While the district's call for neutrality sought to sidestep the political fray, Tolentino recognized the contradiction this posed to the college's dedication to anti-racism and inclusivity. By challenging the concept of neutrality, he engaged in symbolic leadership, asserting that educational institutions already take stances through their outward commitments to equity and justice. While putting him in what he described as a “lose-lose situation,” Tolentino held strong in reinforcing the college's values during contentious global issues.

When President Tolentino faced the unsettling incident of a neighbor brandishing a weapon near Panorama College, it triggered a campus-wide reassessment of safety protocols and communication strategies. This episode brought to light the anxieties surrounding campus security and the need for a cohesive response to ensure the well-being of the college

community. Despite the local law enforcement's decision against a campus-wide shelter in place, due to their assessment of the threat's proximity, this choice sparked a debate among faculty and staff regarding the adequacy of existing safety measures. In response, Tolentino spearheaded an initiative to refine the college's approach to emergency communications, introducing a tiered system to categorize the urgency of incidents and streamline the flow of information. This systemic revision aimed to set clear expectations for all campus constituents in the event of a future crisis. Tolentino also acknowledged the importance of continuous dialogue to rebuild trust and align the protocols with community needs in mind. Through these actions, Tolentino exhibited collegial collaboration and systemic thinking in addressing campus safety concerns.

In addressing the lapse of a critical HSI grant at Panorama College, President Tolentino faced the challenge of maintaining the continuity and effectiveness of HSI initiatives. The shortfall in funding, caused by leadership changes and worsened by the pandemic's disruptions, revealed a systemic flaw in the college's approach to managing and sustaining such grants. Tolentino's reflective critique, "We never knew how to really nurture and cultivate the sustainability of an HSI grant," shows a recognition of the need for a more coordinated and strategic method in handling federal minority-serving institution grants. To correct this oversight and prevent future funding fumbles, Tolentino took decisive action by institutionalizing the positions that were initially grant-funded and developed a comprehensive process for collective institutional responsibility in grant management. This was not just a bureaucratic adjustment, but a strategic move aimed at establishing a culture of proactive grant seeking within the college. By transforming the setback into an opportunity for systemic improvement, Tolentino showed an understanding of the political

and bureaucratic dimensions of organizational behavior. Through this incident, President Tolentino looked to clarify the purpose behind seeking funds, aiming to alter the conditions that maintain inequities, hoping to create meaningful, long-term change at Panorama College.

President Tolentino's presidency at Panorama College is highlighted by three critical incidents that tested his leadership in navigating political sensitivities, ensuring campus safety, and managing institutional resources effectively. His approach to a controversial campus debate over the Israel-Palestine conflict prioritized dialogue and challenged the feasibility of neutrality in an institution committed to social justice. The incident involving a neighbor brandishing a gun near campus spurred a reassessment of safety protocols and communication strategies. Lastly, the lapse of an HSI grant due to missed deadlines prompted a systemic re-evaluation of grant management processes. Through these challenges, President Tolentino is an example of a leader that is empathetic, inclusive, and driven by a strong moral compass, and his responses point to the importance of collegiality, political acumen, and systemic approaches.

### Case 7: President Clara Pennington, Riverview University

> "The joy is in the mission. It's in serving the students we get to serve. And [as long] as higher education remains probably the single best path toward social mobility, if not social equity…it is so worth fighting for." (Pennington, 2023)

#### *Pathway to Presidency*

**Family Background and Education.** As an immigrant from the UK to California, President Pennington navigates a complex identity, acknowledging, "I'm obviously the most privileged kind of immigrant... White, native speaker of English from a comfortably off

family." This self-awareness extends to a broader empathy for other immigrants, spurred by her own personal experiences within the dehumanizing immigration system, despite her advantageous position. Her education, filled with trips back and forth between her family in the UK and California, was shaped by her parents, both university educated. Pennington's undergraduate years were spent at a small liberal arts college in Southern California. While intellectually enriching, she reflected on this period as "great... but also culturally for me very alienating just around economic class," due to socioeconomic disparities between herself and other students. The personal mentorship available at her school was invaluable, but she also observed a disparity in accessibility to faculty, noting that "the men tended to have much more comfortable and close mentoring relationships." After a stint in social justice work, Pennington's realization of her abilities and interests led her to graduate school with the aspiration to "change the world" through academia. Despite the challenges of pursuing a non-funded PhD, she remained committed to leveraging her skills in writing and her passion for literature to encourage empathy and cross-cultural understanding.

**Mentors.** Raised by her single father, President Pennington was notably influenced by a high school teacher who compassionately regarded her as "a motherless fawn out there in the forest," reflective of the empathy and care she received early on from "a lot of generous women mentors". Professionally, Pennington identified two pivotal figures: the Provost at her first academic position and her predecessor, Maddy Murray. These mentors were instrumental in shaping her pathway to the presidency, providing not only guidance but also serving as models of leadership and academic administration.

**Professional Development.** Throughout her ascent to the presidency, President Pennington has engaged with a variety of professional development resources. She shared, "one of the

professional development resources that's just generally been useful to me as I came to being a Dean, and then Provost was the CIC, the Council of Independent Colleges." These national gatherings, particularly for Chief Academic Officers, provided her with invaluable insights and networking opportunities that shaped her administrative approach. Pennington also discussed the broader impact of the Association of American Colleges & Universities (AAC&U), noting, "their annual meetings are great because they pull you up from the weeds to really reflecting on what's the public purpose of higher education and the idealistic value." This perspective encouraged her to contemplate higher education's role beyond the confines of her institution. However, it was the Harvard Seminar for New Presidents that Pennington highlights as "the single best professional development opportunity I've ever had." Her participation in this seminar, recommended by her predecessor and endorsed by the Board, proved to be transformative. Describing the diversity and openness of her cohort, she recalls, "It was 60 new presidents, almost all of us first-time presidents from totally different kinds of institutions... And everybody was just open and vulnerable and collaborative." This environment not only facilitated deep learning but also fostered a sense of camaraderie and mutual support among leaders facing similar challenges.

**Professional Roles and Inspirations.** President Pennington's pathway to the presidency is a blend of academic achievement, administrative expertise, and a consistent commitment to inclusive education. Reflecting on her early academic appointments, she shared, "I was very lucky to land a tenure track job afterward in [the Northeast]. So, I came up through the faculty as a creative writing professor." Her academic path was not only influenced by her love for teaching but also by her recognition of the potential for change within administrative roles. She recalled her mentor's warning, "Do not take on an administrative

role, because you will never be the scholar you should be if you do," which she did find to be true while also finding satisfaction in her ability to support other faculty and implement change. Pennington's dedication to seeking more diverse academic leadership, especially among women, was shaped by her experience at a Jesuit institution under a Provost committed to this cause. She was initially encouraged by the Provost, who recognized her problem-solving skills and opinionated nature, and invited her to work in the Provost Office. This move was driven by the "allure of being able to make change," a higher salary, and personal preferences for living in the West.

Later on, Pennington made the decision to become a Dean at a small college, which was a calculated step down in rank that brought her closer to faculty and students. This move also aligned with her desire to make high-quality, liberal education accessible to a broader demographic. She explained, "to see an institution that had the small college, liberal education-based model... but was making that model accessible to students who looked nothing like me, who looked like California, and the future of the US, was so compelling to me." Pennington's interest in the college presidency was not driven by a long-standing ambition but by a belief in the mission of her institution and the campus vision she had helped develop. Despite initial reluctance when her current position opened up, the encouragement from her predecessor and her own self-reflection led her to pursue the presidency. She shared, "I did not want to be president... But when the previous president... said that 10 years was enough, and was kind enough to say that I should think about throwing my hat in the ring... I changed my mind in about 15 minutes flat." In the presidency, Pennington has grappled with the challenges of higher education's changing landscape, striving to maintain a mission-focused approach while navigating economic

constraints. Her reflections on leadership are influenced by her activist academic background and her commitment to democratizing education. As Pennington puts it, "I've always distrusted hierarchy and distrusted authority... But wanting to think, how can I inhabit the President's role in a way that is far more democratic, inclusive? Informal, accessible, all of those things."

### *Familiarization with a New Institution*

**Initial Familiarization.** Having served as Interim President for three months and as Academic Vice President or Provost for seven years at Riverview University, President Pennington entered the presidency with a solid understanding of the institution's inner workings. "I thought I knew what it entailed," she reflected on her interim presidency, acknowledging that her role at the time was primarily to "hold things steady" without a mandate for change. But the shift from Provost to President revealed differences not just in the nature of work but also the pace of daily activities. Pennington shared, "being a President is actually a lot less busy than being a Provost." Despite her extensive experience within the university, she made clear that surprises are inevitable: "There are still surprises. Even when you've worked really, really closely with the previous president for 10 years, there's still surprises."

Pennington's inside candidacy offered both advantages and challenges. Having already been integrated into the community provided her with a nuanced understanding of the institution, yet she also faced the ongoing challenge of fully grasping the ever-evolving dynamics of the university. "I'm always discovering stuff," she admitted. The need for a holistic view of the university, encompassing not just the academic community but also trustees, donors, and external partners, is a responsibility Pennington takes seriously.

However, she also recognized the importance of balancing her external duties with the desire to remain accessible and approachable to students, faculty, and staff. "I'm so lucky to trust, but I also just need to get out on campus and drop in and talk to people," she stated, acknowledging the balance between accessibility and the intrusion her presence might represent in certain spaces. For President Pennington, leadership is a continuous process of learning how to wield power responsibly, promote social justice, and facilitate access to higher education. "It's a constant process of learning how to inhabit the power," she reflected. Despite external desires for a parental figurehead who can solve all problems, Pennington remains committed to a vision of leadership that is assuring, visionary, and mindful of her unique position within the university's ecosystem.

**Allies and Detractors.** During her transition, President Pennington enjoyed the backing of key figures, including the Board President who was "a very informal, accessible, supportive person," and a retired college president who was also on the board who served as a sounding board. Additionally, her network expanded to include "fellow new presidents" and "a couple of retired Presidents." Her immediate predecessor, serving as President Emerita, offered weekly consultations. Pennington reflected on this period, highlighting the invaluable advice: "she was incredibly tactful about being there without intruding." However, not all feedback during her early days in office was positive. As an internal candidate, Pennington faced immediate expectations for change, particularly from the faculty. As if on cue, the full-time faculty voted to unionize shortly after her presidency began. Pennington understood the faculty's impatience for change but found that “one of the disadvantages of being an internal candidate is that I got no honeymoon period."

**Campus Culture.** Riverview University has a “committed, caring” campus culture, a quality President Pennington quickly recognized when she first arrived. The small school environment allows for strong, positive relationships among faculty, staff, and students, reflecting a community dedicated to mutual support and respect. Pennington described the students as "very earnest, very hard working," and noted the effort to create "a culture of belonging” while also acknowledging the ongoing challenge of achieving true inclusivity. The campus community faces significant challenges, primarily stemming from fatigue and resource constraints. Pennington captured the sentiment of the university's employees, stating, "We are so tired at this point, everyone is very tired," in reference to the demands of supporting students and fulfilling institutional responsibilities on “a very, very tight budget."

### *Perspective on HSI Status*

President Pennington views Riverview University's status as an HSI through the lens of student success, pointing to the parity in persistence and graduation rates between Latino students and their White counterparts. This achievement, she believes, signals that the university has "built academic and cultural, social, and student support infrastructure that is responsive to Latinx students." However, she acknowledged the challenges brought on by COVID-19, which have slightly impacted these rates, arguing that any dip is "not okay.” Looking ahead, President Pennington expresses eagerness to engage more deeply with the HSI community. She is proud to be a "part of a community of HSI leaders" and appreciates the value of learning from others, especially Latino leaders, within the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities (HACU) in efforts to maintain and enhance support structures for Latino students at Riverview University. Pitched also touched upon the inherent financial

challenges of maintaining such support in an HSI context. She reported there is "continual conflict and stress" around finding a financial equilibrium that allows institutions like Riverview to continue serving historically marginalized and low socioeconomic status student populations effectively.

### *Critical Incident #1: The Internal Hire*

President Pennington's decision to promote the Assistant Vice President to Vice President for Advancement and Community Engagement at Riverview University marked a critical point early in her presidency. Faced with the departure of the then-current VP, Pennington deliberated on whether to initiate an external search for a replacement or to elevate the less-experienced, existing Assistant VP, Erin, who exemplified the university's culture and its aspirations for inclusivity and authenticity. She valued Erin's "informality and genuine and authentic" manner, which Pennington believed could be particularly appealing to the university's younger, more diverse alumni and donor base. The outgoing VP, despite her depth of experience and strong relationship with Pennington's predecessor, represented a more traditional approach to alumni relations and fundraising. Pennington saw in Erin a chance to "shift the ethos a little bit" towards a mode that prioritized "authenticity in our leadership". She was cognizant of the risks involved in promoting from within, especially regarding the potential for "reproducing existing structures." Yet, she viewed this choice as a strategic risk worth taking, one that was "more authentic to who we are now and our student population, their families." The value of her decision was later realized by Erin's promotion of a Latina to Assistant Vice President, another move towards diversifying Riverview leadership. Reflecting on the outcome of the decision, Pennington noted, "there has not been a significant change, certainly not a significant decrease" in fundraising results.

While the experience has not led her to a blanket preference for internal promotions, it has bolstered her confidence in valuing mission alignment and cultural fit over conventional professional polish.

***Critical Incident #2: Deal Made, Salary Cut***

In a pivotal board meeting last Spring, President Pennington faced the tough task of addressing Riverview University's significant budget deficit, compounded by the end of federal COVID relief funds and a series of smaller undergraduate classes. With a candid approach, she shared, "We knew that we would be finishing the last fiscal year with a very significant budget deficit... after COVID, we were no longer able to disguise this budget deficit by drawing on one-time resources." The financial strain was ratcheted up by the first collective bargaining agreement with the full-time faculty who were demanding a raise that the budget could hardly accommodate. In a bold move to secure faculty agreement and show leadership solidarity, Pennington and her senior leadership team accepted personal salary reductions. She explained her rationale: "I'm putting a huge chunk of my own salary on the table... because this is the only way I know, to convince you that we really do not have any other money that we could be giving as much as you deserve it." However, the Board's response to her proposal to gradually rebalance the budget, instead of immediate drastic cuts, was unexpectedly negative. "The Board said no," Pennington recounted. This decision forced the university into a corner, requiring severe austerity measures that she had hoped to avoid, while keeping intact both the faculty union contract and her own salary sacrifice. Looking back on this moment, Pennington acknowledged a misjudgment of the Board's mood. Yet, she managed to navigate this tightrope, presenting a balanced budget projection by the fiscal year's end, and achieving a smaller, more manageable deficit. She concluded,

“we succeeded in raising enrollment this Fall... but we didn't quite meet the target. So, we still have a smaller deficit, [but] a much more manageable deficit.” This incident not only strained her relationship with the Board but also prompted her to reconsider her leadership, communication, and assertiveness. "I need to learn how to project power much more effectively in board meetings," Pennington admitted. This realization led her to work with an executive coach, aiming to refine her boardroom presence. Through this critical incident, Pennington's devotion to Riverview University's mission and community shined through, even as she navigated the treacherous waters of governance board dynamics.

### *Critical Incident #3: The Israel-Palestine Conflict*

In navigating the complex dynamics surrounding the Israel-Palestine conflict, President Pennington has grappled with the best approach to address a deeply divisive issue within the university community. She discussed the importance of affirming the community's sense of belonging, especially for students from underrepresented backgrounds, including both Muslim and Jewish students and employees. The challenge, as President Pennington described, was finding the right balance in her messaging to the community without alienating or offending any group. Her initial attempt to address the situation focused on support, avoiding political stances. She recounted, "I really tried in my statement to focus on saying I know that there are a lot of us who are feeling pain and fear right now. And let's be good to one another. And let's treat this as an issue of care in our community." However, afterwards she received feedback that her message upset some in the Jewish community on campus. Under fire, Pennington issued a second message that acknowledged what they had perceived as an oversight and attempted to more explicitly recognize the depth of pain experienced by Jewish colleagues and students. But, for some,

even this second message did not go far enough. She recalled, "I've been told that I did not sufficiently see the pain of Jewish colleagues and students here."

Despite these efforts, Pennington admitted to the inherent challenges of addressing such a contentious issue: "I do think that this is a situation where there is no win." Indicating an inequality of lines of communication, she pointed out that “some of our biggest donors to the institution are Jewish,” versus Muslims on campus “whose voice, to be honest, tends to be very quiet.” This created a situation where Pennington “didn't know who [she] was hurting.” She has pondered the limitations and potential costs of her messaging strategy, particularly in terms of the harm done to her relationships with Jewish donors yet remained firm in her principle that the mission and whole community's well-being must guide her actions. In response to whether Pennington needed to do more than issue a second message, she asserted, "No, I have not felt that I had to go beyond but that may have a cost. That's the overlying principle, right? That you have to maintain your commitment to mission and your whole community. Regardless of generous and powerful donors.”

President Pennington acknowledged her greater familiarity and understanding of the issues related to racial justice in the United States, particularly those highlighted by the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, compared to her understanding of the details surrounding “Jewish and Arab-American experiences” and the arguments related to the Israel-Palestine conflict. She noted the difficulty in finding a clear consensus or alignment on the Israel-Palestine issue within the political left, contrasting it with the more straightforward alignment on issues of racial justice and anti-racism. Clearly conflicted, Pennington reflected how it has “felt really comfortable for me to be a left wing president so far…I'm pro union, I'm anti-White supremacy, anti-homophobia, transphobia…This is one

where my commitments, my activism, feels much less clear in terms of being committed to anti colonial movements, and yet also being absolutely committed to combating antisemitism."

***Summary and Analysis***

Supported by mentors who recognized her potential for transformative leadership, President Pennington worked her way through academia from a tenure track position to administrative roles, ultimately embracing the presidency at Riverview. Pennington's leadership approach prioritizes democratic principles, inclusivity, and the dismantling of traditional hierarchies. Facing immediate demands for change, notably from a faculty that quickly moved to unionize, Pennington had no "honeymoon period" in her presidency. Further, much of her focus has been on addressing the challenges posed by economic constraints and the fatigue of the university's employees. In light of the institution's HSI status, Pennington argues for the importance of supporting Latino students' success, aiming for parity in persistence and graduation rates. She has been eager to engage with the HSI community while also being aware of the financial challenges of sustaining support for historically marginalized populations. In sum, President Pennington is an empathetic leadership who believes strongly in education's role in driving social change and fostering community.

In a pivotal hiring decision, President Pennington elevated an internal candidate, Erin, to Vice President for Advancement and Community Engagement. This move was based on a strategic assessment of the university's needs against the backdrop of an increasingly diverse alumni and donor community. Opting against an external search, Pennington valued Erin's authenticity and embodiment of the university culture. This

decision not only showed bold decision-making and bureaucratic maneuvering, but also served as a symbolic gesture towards supporting authentic leadership at Riverview. By prioritizing cultural fit and potential over extensive experience, Pennington's choice to promote from within pointed to a belief in nurturing internal talent that mirrors the school mission and its recent demographic shifts. The subsequent appointment of a Latina as Assistant Vice President under Erin further reinforced this direction, showing a conscious effort to diversify the university's leadership in meaningful ways. This bureaucratic, symbolic, and collegial decision-making process highlights Pennington's layered approach to presidential leadership.

President Pennington faced a daunting challenge when confronting a severe budget deficit exacerbated by dwindling federal COVID relief funds and a reduction in undergraduate enrollment. During a crucial board meeting in Spring, she outlined the university's financial predicaments, stemming from a combination of an ending of one-time dollars and the need to honor a new collective bargaining agreement with faculty that demanded higher wages. In a show of solidarity and commitment to shared sacrifice, Pennington and her senior leadership team volunteered for personal salary cuts as a good-faith gesture, as well as a nod to the severity of the budgetary constraints. This move was met with unexpected resistance from the Board, which rejected her proposed gradual approach to budget balancing in favor of more immediate, drastic austerity measures. This incident is an example of political and symbolic actions within organizational behavior. Pennington's willingness to reduce her own salary served as a powerful symbol of leadership, empathy, and integrity in the spirit of collegial unity. However, the board's

rejection highlighted the political challenges in aligning expectations and reality across a wide range of campus constituents.

Amid the Israel-Palestine conflict, President Pennington attempted to uphold a sense of community and belonging on campus while navigating the collegiate and political complexities that arose. Striving to maintain evenness in her communications, her initial message urged mutual care without taking a political stance. Yet, the feedback from the pro-Israeli community on campus suggested the message fell short in recognizing their specific pain, prompting a second, more tailored outreach. This follow-up, apparently, also did not fully address the concerns raised, which speaks to the challenge of addressing such a deeply polarizing issue without worsening divides or straining relationships with significant stakeholders, including influential donors. Additionally, the contrasting responses from pro-Israeli and pro-Palestinian community factions showed an asymmetry in communication lines to the president. This ultimately placed Pennington in a predicament fraught with potential missteps and unintended consequences. Further complicating the issue is Pennington's acknowledgment of her own political and social justice bearings, which, while providing clarity on domestic issues of racial justice, did not necessarily offer the same guidance in the context of the Israel-Palestine debate. Through this critical incident, President Pennington's efforts to engage collegially, while also grappling with the political implications of her leadership decisions offers a glimpse at the balancing act in working through divisive conflicts within a university community. However, her commitment to mission and community, even at the potential cost of donor relationships, points to a leadership approach grounded in principle.

In the first critical incident, President Pennington's leadership was tested through strategic staffing decisions, notably promoting Erin to Vice President for Advancement and Community Engagement, a move that prioritized cultural fit and potential over traditional experience. Addressing a significant budget deficit, Pennington proposed personal salary cuts for the senior leadership team as a symbol of solidarity, treading through the politics of board dynamics and fiscal austerity with tact. In the midst of the Israel-Palestine conflict, Pennington looked to maintain campus unity while respectfully acknowledging the sensitivities of all community members, struggling to address a divisive global issue within a domestic collegiate environment. Across these scenarios, President Pennington's approach is mission-driven, embracing collegial and political organizational behaviors to guide Riverview University through periods of change.

### Case 8: President Tessa Norwood, Oakleaf University

> "Build trust, over-communicate, be transparent, be accountable. When you make a mistake– and you will, own it, apologize, rectify it, and have courage." (Norwood, 2024)

#### *Pathway to Presidency*

**Family Background and Education.** President Norwood's early life was shaped by her family's transition from owning nursing homes in the Midwest to establishing cattle ranches when she was around four or five years old. This transition was not just a change in business but a complete lifestyle shift, where her family built their ranch from the ground up. She recalled, "we raised a barn, we built the house," highlighting the hands-on effort and do-it-yourself work ethic instilled in her from an early age. But this period of her life was not only about physical labor, it was also about learning financial responsibility, as she saved enough money from hoeing the garden to buy a horse at a young age, demonstrating an early knack

for saving and investing. However, Norwood's family faced significant hardships when the recession of 1979 hit, timed alongside a health scare linking red meat to heart disease, which devastated the meat market and their cattle business. Her father's subsequent massive stroke and untimely death left the family in a precarious financial situation. Norwood describes the drastic shift in their lifestyle, from affluence to extreme financial distress, emphasizing the perseverance and struggles of her family. "We went from being pretty wealthy...to having to staple our shoes together," she shared, painting a vivid picture of their challenges.

Amidst this childhood turmoil, the figure of Norwood's father's estate attorney stood out as a beacon of hope and inspiration. Observing this woman navigate through the complexities of their family situation with confidence and expertise motivated Norwood to pursue a path where she could be the one with answers, the one who could provide security and guidance in times of uncertainty. This epiphany steered her towards excellence in education, adhering to her father's non-negotiable expectation of achieving straight A's and the belief that education was the key to secure a better future. Despite the financial hardships, she earned a scholarship for college, where she continued to work 30 hours a week to support herself, graduating in three years with a 3.95 GPA. Her educational path took her from one Midwestern public university to another for undergraduate studies, and eventually to a Mid Atlantic public university for law school, where she strategically worked in the state to establish residency and reduce her tuition costs. President Norwood's early story is a powerful example of how adversity can fuel ambition, leading to remarkable achievements backed by the values of hard work and the transformative power of education.

**Mentors.** One of President Norwood's most important mentors was a Chancellor who, recognizing the need for a Chief of Staff as advised by the Board of Trustees, personally

invited her to take on the role. Despite her initial skepticism, given her clear plan to become campus general counsel, the Chancellor's proposition of mentoring her towards a college presidency marked a turning point. "I would mentor you to become a college president," he offered, candidly acknowledging the limitations imposed by her non-traditional background for leading an R1 institution but affirming the possibility of presiding over a liberal arts college. This mentorship extended beyond the mere assignment of duties; it encompassed guidance on navigating career transitions and contract negotiations, with the Chancellor actively supporting her growth even as she prepared to leave the Chief of Staff position. "These are the things you need to be thinking about," he advised. Another key figure for Norwood was the General Counsel, who, though less vocal about his role as a mentor, imparted invaluable lessons on team building, trust, and gracious leadership through his actions. Norwood credits him with showing her "how to build a team and how to be gracious and give trust." Equally instrumental was the informal network of women leaders within the university, including the Athletic Director, the Associate Vice Chancellor for Advancement, the Director of Human Resources, and others. This group, self-styled as "women who get stuff done," provided a collaborative forum for problem-solving and strategizing on university initiatives. Their gatherings, characterized by mutual support and strategic brainstorming over wine, highlighted the power of peer mentorship and the role of supportive networks in navigating institutional challenges. "We were sort of the behind the curtain group who could really figure out how to get anything done at the University," Norwood reminisced.

**Challenges, Obstacles and Complications.** President Norwood faced hurdles on her pathway to the presidency, including complex ethical and professional challenges that tested

her resolve and integrity. Among these, a particularly daunting situation arose when a whistleblower complaint implicated the Chancellor of a Southern public university—a figure central to Norwood's professional orbit. The gravity of the situation was amplified by its public exposure: "And was on the front page of the newspaper," she highlighted. The challenge intensified when a prominent board member, wielding considerable influence and legal expertise, proposed that Norwood lead an internal investigation into the Chancellor. This suggestion placed her in an ethically precarious position, given her reporting structure and the inherent conflict of interest: "I really didn't think that was the right thing to do." Norwood's concerns about credibility and bias in the investigation's findings were profound, recognizing that "there would certainly be allegations of bias" against any report she produced without external oversight. Determined to uphold the integrity of the investigation, Norwood engaged in a strategic maneuver to advocate for an external review. Her approach involved bypassing the board member and directly seeking the support of the Board Chair: "And so I really had to go to the General Counsel and kind of put my foot down." The subsequent involvement of an external party in the investigation, while a victory for transparency, did not alleviate the discomfort of interviewing her superior and other high-ranking officials with deep-rooted connections within the state.

**Professional Development.** President Norwood's participation in Leadership North Carolina stands out as a foundational experience, offering a comprehensive view of the state across various sectors—ranging from education and economic development to environmental issues and social services. This program not only broadened her understanding of the state's complexities but also emphasized the importance of personal development within the context of leadership. Another pivotal moment in her professional

growth was attending the Crises Leadership in Higher Education executive program at Harvard, which proved to be transformational. This seminar came at a critical time, following a tragic incident at her institution involving an arc flash explosion. Leading the response to this crisis, Norwood coordinated with OSHA, led investigations, and spearheaded the development of a comprehensive report and follow-up actions. The seminar at Harvard equipped her with invaluable insights into managing crises, particularly the challenge when an emergency evolves into a crisis, and the importance of recognizing and overcoming confirmation bias. Lastly, Norwood participated in a presidential leadership program designed specifically for new presidents. Through these varied and intensive programs, Norwood developed a deep leadership toolkit.

**Professional Roles and Inspirations.** Starting her career in law, President Norwood always harbored a desire to transition into education, a dream that came true when she joined a Southern public university as an attorney, despite initially being turned down. Her journey in higher education was not just about legal counsel; it evolved into a role deeply intertwined with the institution's growth and strategic development. Her transition from in-house counsel to Chief of Staff was pivotal, encouraged by the Chancellor who saw potential in her. During her tenure as Chief of Staff, Norwood was entrusted with significant projects that shaped the university's future, from helping with the start of the University’s football program to managing complex construction issues with regional entities. This role was crucial in developing her ability to navigate complex political landscapes and execute strategic initiatives. The Chancellor mentored her with the intention of preparing her for a college presidency.

Her move to a small private institution as President was a significant shift, presenting challenges related to cultural adaptation and the expectations of a college president in a tight-knit community. Norwood candidly reflects on this period as a learning curve, where she had to adjust her leadership style to meet the demands of a vastly different environment: "I was following the examples that I had seen...And on the small private campus, it's a very different presidency." Despite those initial struggles, Norwood was instrumental in transitioning that institution from an all-women's school to a co-ed institution, a pyrrhic victory that left her with diminished political capital and eventually led to her decision to seek another presidency. The opportunity at Oakleaf University came unexpectedly during the pandemic, introduced by a headhunter who recognized her potential fit for the institution. Despite initial reservations about relocating to California, the university's mission, and its status as a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) resonated with her past academic interests and personal values: "The chance to be at an institution where that was a key part of its mission was really exciting for me."

### *Familiarization with a New Institution*

**Initial Familiarization.** Upon assuming the presidency at Oakleaf University, President Norwood brought with her the lessons learned from her first presidency, particularly the critical importance of engaging with the campus community and understanding the institution's financial health. She emphasized, "I didn't come with a strong financial background. But I really had to get up to speed on that quickly," acknowledging the steep learning curve she faced when confronted with the potential of not meeting payroll in the presidency at her previous institution. This experience drove home for her that "there's no mission without a budget" that works, driving her to ensure financial stability at Oakleaf

from the outset. Navigating the post-COVID return to campus added another layer of complexity to her familiarization process. President Norwood encountered "challenges and leftover frustration and low morale" stemming from the pandemic's impact, requiring her to motivate the community to overcome fear and adapt to new working norms. This transition was marked by contrasts between her experiences in more conservative states with differing COVID-19 responses, which she found "fascinating."

Understanding the inherent loneliness and high stakes of the presidency, Norwood reflected, "It's a very lonely job...if you make a mistake, no one's coming to bail you out." President Norwood remains committed to exploring and understanding the evolving dynamics of Oakleaf University, acknowledging, "I'm always learning new stuff...things change, and students change all the time." Her approach to leadership is characterized by a blend of curiosity, adaptability, and a proactive stance on engaging with the campus community to learn and adapt continuously. This ongoing journey of familiarization indicates a commitment to not only managing the institution's present challenges but also anticipating and responding to future changes in the higher education landscape.

**Allies and Detractors.** President Norwood inherited a mixed bag of cabinet members. On the one hand, she found a solid partner in a Chief Financial Officer who, despite not having a direct background in finance, showed commitment and hard work. This ally, an alumnus who transitioned from another role on campus, played a crucial role during the transitional period. However, President Norwood faced challenges with other members of the existing leadership team. The Provost at the time, while experienced, was stretched thin across multiple roles, hindering effective management of the Deans and progress within the institution. Additionally, an Interim Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences and another

Dean consistently failed to meet agreed-upon deadlines for launching new programs. The process also revealed detractors among the faculty, some of whom were skeptical of President Norwood's non-traditional background and its implications for understanding and valuing their roles within the university. These challenges, coupled with existing frustrations and low morale stemming from before her tenure, highlighted the need for significant leadership changes. In response to these dynamics, President Norwood undertook a substantial overhaul of the university's leadership, replacing eight of the 14 cabinet positions within her first three years. This decisive action was part of her strategy to align the administration with her vision for the university, address the inherited challenges, and move Oakleaf University forward.

**Campus Culture.** President Norwood describes the campus culture of Oakleaf University as one deeply committed to the mission of service, evidenced by the unique inclusion of community service in the general education requirement. This commitment fosters a culture of collegiality, informality, and kindness, where interactions are friendly and personal, as highlighted by President Norwood's experience of being greeted by her first name by students from day one. This openness and warmth were both surprising and delightful for her, marking a stark contrast to her previous experiences in the Southeast. However, Norwood also encountered unexpected challenges at Oakleaf, particularly regarding the institution's siloed nature. Despite its smaller size compared to her previous institution of nearly 30,000 students, Oakleaf exhibited more pronounced divisions between schools, creating unnecessary barriers for students. Addressing this issue became a priority for Norwood, who emphasized the importance of breaking down these silos to enhance student-focused collaboration across the university. She introduced the goal of putting the "uni" back

in the university, acknowledging that this effort is a continuous work in progress. Another aspect of the campus culture that Norwood navigates is the university's relationship with the surrounding community. She notes the importance of engaging with the local community, recognizing the university's role as an economic driver, cultural touchstone, and arts scene contributor.

***Perspective on HSI Status***

President Norwood discussed Oakleaf University' embrace of its Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) status, a designation that offers both opportunities and challenges in fostering a campus culture that truly reflects and supports its diverse student body. With the achievement of receiving their first Title V grant just within the past year, Norwood explained the university's commitment to building upon existing programs like the summer bridge and peer-to-peer mentoring programs. However, she candidly shared the ongoing struggle to authentically integrate culture in a way that respects and embraces intersectionality among students, acknowledging the complexity of creating a sense of belonging for everyone. Efforts to engage with both the faith and cultural communities, along with faculty-led projects such as the oral history mapping of the Hispanic community in the region, demonstrate proactive steps towards recognizing and celebrating the rich histories and contributions of these communities. Norwood emphasizes the importance of avoiding stereotypes and meeting students where they are to provide cultural support in a manner they find meaningful. Norwood's personal attraction to the HSI designation stems from her undergraduate studies and interest in Chicano literature, indicating a deep-rooted enthusiasm for the mission of serving a diverse student population. She references the "four quadrants of success and culture" to describe the ideal of achieving both high student

success and a strong sense of cultural belonging. Despite high academic performance among Latino students at Oakleaf, Norwood identified a gap in cultural engagement and inclusivity on campus. Addressing this issue is a current focus of the leadership as they determine the best way to "engage that space."

### *Critical Incident #1: The Coach's Post*

Facing the aftermath of a controversial anti-Black social media post by a once-beloved coach amidst racial tensions and the broader Black Lives Matter movement, President Norwood stepped into a charged atmosphere at Oakleaf University. She quickly learned that prior commitments made to address racial relations and campus climate had not been fully actioned, leading to a trust deficit within the community. Norwood emphasized the critical nature of fulfilling these commitments, stating, "It's really important that you do the things you say you're going to do. It's really part of trust and accountability." Navigating through these complexities, Norwood engaged deeply with her cabinet and key faculty members who were involved in the dialogue around these issues. Her approach was grounded in listening and asking questions to understand their perspectives and desires for advancing this work. The establishment of a permanent DEI committee within the Board, a move from an ad hoc setup, marked a significant step in institutionalizing the commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion. This decision aimed to ensure that DEI values were interwoven into all aspects of the university's governance and operations.

Norwood's leadership through this period was characterized by a commitment to open communication and transparency. Recognizing the importance of over-communicating, especially on sensitive topics, she advised, "I always say people hear what they fear…so you have to really know what they're scared of, anticipate what that is, speak to it directly, I

think as much as possible, say it several different times and several different ways" Through her efforts to engage in clear, repetitive communication and inviting tough questions, Norwood sought to foster a climate of better alignment and engagement across the university community. Reflecting on the journey, Norwood noted the positive outcomes of these efforts, including a more aligned board, improved campus climate, and a strengthened commitment to DEI work. However, she highlighted the ongoing nature of this work. Through these actions, President Norwood demonstrated a proactive and thoughtful approach to leadership, prioritizing promise-keeping, communication, and inclusive community engagement.

### *Critical Incident #2: The Return to Normalcy*

Navigating the return to in-person learning amidst the pandemic, President Norwood encountered a wide array of challenges, from health policy implications to the mental well-being of the university community. With stringent restrictions in place, the transition back to campus life was filled with reluctance and uncertainty. Norwood noted, "There was much more trepidation, there were heightened discussions about being tired and about mental health issues here than what I had heard where I came from," highlighting the unique circumstances faced in California compared to her previous position in the South. To address these challenges, Norwood drew upon her prior experience, arguing for the safety of on-campus activities and the importance of adapting to new communication and meeting formats. She said, "I just think you have to be willing to engage with people the way that they want to engage if you're really intent on trying to get as much input as possible." This approach helped ease the transition back to a semblance of normalcy, although the campus

environment remained altered, with hybrid models persisting in meetings and faculty interactions.

As the campus returned to normal, President Norwood pivoted to the implementation of a new strategic plan. She aimed to set clear priorities and deadlines, tying them to external events or pressing requirements to create a sense of urgency. She introduced the Scrum management process to the university's operations, a methodology designed to improve teamwork, communication, and speed of development. Explaining its benefits, Norwood shared, "It's a system of doing work that really came out of information technology...that helps them to highly prioritize their work, do it faster, see progress, that builds morale, and gets to an agreed upon definition of done." This innovative management strategy not only facilitated project completion but also motivated the staff and faculty, providing a structured yet flexible framework for tackling the university's strategic goals. Norwood reflected on the positive impact of Scrum, noting, “seeing progress helps to build morale. And so, I think that it's really positive and a little bit surprising on how it's working." Through these efforts, President Norwood showed an ability to navigate the complexities of the post-pandemic recovery, focusing on community well-being, efficient project management, and the adaptive leadership necessary to guide Oakleaf University through uncertain times.

***Critical Incident #3: The Merger***

President Norwood recently embarked on a major effort for Oakleaf University with the announcement of its third merger in five years, this time with Ashgrove University in Southern California. This merger, following the integration of North Coast Seminary and Uptown Graduate School, aims to incorporate nearly 1,000 students into Oakleaf University

community. Norwood reflected on the process, stating, "It tends to start with a cold solicitation email...and then you start doing your due diligence and thinking about working on financial projections." Learning from past experiences, Norwood and her team approached the Ashgrove merger with a strategic sensitivity to preserving the merged institution's identity. Unlike the North Coast Seminary merger, where the original name was initially phased out and caused understandable strife, Norwood explained, "when we did the merger… for Ashgrove, it will become Oakleaf University Ashgrove campus." This approach aims to honor the legacy of the merged institutions while expanding Oakleaf University' footprint and recognition, particularly in the densely populated Southern California area.

The merger process has been guided by a combination of financial acumen and a deep understanding of the challenges and opportunities such integrations present. President Norwood credited the Board of Trustees, particularly those with professional expertise in mergers and acquisitions, for their critical support and insight. However, the process has not been without its detractors and challenges, particularly concerning faculty concerns over program overlap and the potential impacts on workload and student enrollment. Norwood acknowledged these challenges, stating, "It brings a lot of issues to the surface...And I think that that is challenging, but it's also a real opportunity to understand what are the main concerns people have." Navigating regulatory hurdles has also been a learning curve, especially with the Department of Education's new two-step process for merger approvals. Norwood expressed concerns about the timeline, highlighting the uncertainty and potential implications for planning and integration efforts. Reflecting on the broader impacts of these mergers, Norwood noted, "I think that it's taught us how we think about the work that we do,

[and] how we gain economies of scale." Her approach here speaks to the importance of strategic opportunism, and leadership in steering the university through these complex transitions, balancing growth, and integration with respect for the traditions and identities of all institutions involved.

### *Summary and Analysis*

From her roots in a family that shifted from healthcare to agriculture before financial upheaval, President Norwood's pathway to the presidency was paved by hard work, determination, and the influence of a pivotal legal mentor during her youth. These early experiences shaped her worldview and led her to a career in law and, eventually, higher education. Along the way, Norwood was guided by key people and mentors who recognized her potential beyond traditional academic paths and steered her towards university administration. Despite challenges, Norwood maintained her integrity and dedication to transparent, accountable leadership. Her participation in leadership development programs further honed her crisis management and strategic planning skills, preparing her for a university presidency. At Oakleaf University, Norwood encountered a campus culture imbued with service and collegiality, though it struggled with structural silos and a need for greater inclusivity under its recently designated HSI status. Her proactive leadership style is evident in her efforts to turn over the university's leadership, embrace financial challenges with openness, and deepen the institution's commitment to serving its diverse student body. President Norwood stands as a powerful example of how empathetic and transparent leadership can effectively address the complex challenges of contemporary higher education.

In addressing the repercussions of a coach's racially insensitive social media post during a time of heightened racial awareness and the Black Lives Matter movement, President Norwood was confronted with the task of guiding Oakleaf University through a period of distrust and dissatisfaction. Discovering that previous promises to improve racial relations on campus remained unfulfilled only exacerbated the sense of betrayal felt by the community. Norwood actively consulted her cabinet and key faculty, collaborating on plans and aspirations for how to propel the campus forward on issues pertaining to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). This dialogue led to the creation of a permanent DEI committee within the Board, signifying a structural commitment to the cause. Norwood's strategy to mend campus relations also hinged on transparent and highly iterative communication. She stressed the significance of articulating commitments and actions clearly and repeatedly, especially when navigating sensitive subjects. Reflecting on the aftermath, she observed a noticeable improvement in board alignment and campus climate. Through her efforts to fulfill old promises, enhance communication, and engage inclusively with the campus community, President Norwood showed a collaborative and responsive leadership style during this critical incident.

During the cautious transition back to in-person operations during the pandemic, President Norwood faced a complex set of challenges in steering Oakleaf University towards a "new normal." She encountered widespread reluctance to return to campus and observed significant concerns regarding mental health, more pronounced than in her previous experience in the Southeast. The situation in California required a thoughtful and adaptable leadership approach. To meet these concerns head-on, Norwood leveraged her prior experiences to reassure the community about the safety of campus activities. As the

campus returned to normal, she turned her focus to implementing a new strategic plan. During this process, Norwood emphasized the necessity of prioritizing tasks and setting definitive deadlines. Recognizing the importance of accountability, she introduced the Scrum management technique to the institution. Scrum provided a structure for prioritizing tasks, enhancing team collaboration, and achieving quicker, more visible progress. Norwood highlighted how this approach not only expedited project completion but also bolstered morale among the staff and faculty by offering a clear, shared understanding of objectives and achievements. President Norwood's application of the Scrum methodology is an example of bureaucratic and collegial organizational behavior. Through these measures, Norwood mitigated the challenges of returning to campus life and addressed the needs of Oakleaf University community post-pandemic.

In an ambitious initiative to merge Ashgrove University with Oakleaf University, President Norwood leveraged a highly multidimensional organizational approach, combining bureaucratic, collegial, political, and systemic behaviors with a touch of the symbolic dimension. This merger, the university's third in five years, will incorporate nearly a thousand students into Oakleaf community once completed, pointing to Norwood's visionary, expansionist, and forward-thinking mindset. Drawing from previous experiences, notably the integration with North Coast Seminary and Uptown Graduate School, Norwood adopted a layered strategy to preserve Ashgrove's identity, a move aimed at acknowledging its legacy while extending Oakleaf' reach. The process began with due diligence and financial forecasting, reflecting a bureaucratic and systemic understanding of merger dynamics. Norwood also honored the heritage of merged entities, applying a symbolic layer to the bureaucracy of the undertaking. Acknowledging the vital role of individual members

of the Board of Trustees, especially those with merger and acquisitions expertise, speaks to a collaborative, collegial effort. However, the merger was not without issue, from faculty panic over program redundancies to the anxieties surrounding lengthy regulatory approval timelines set by the Department of Education. These challenges required a political acumen to manage internal and external expectations and negotiations. President Norwood's leadership in this critical incident reflects a prioritization of expansion and integration, as well as the significance of addressing stakeholder concerns while pursuing the university's broader strategic objectives.

President Norwood tackled significant challenges at Oakleaf University with a multidimensional leadership style. When a coach's controversial post that occurred before she arrived stirred racial tensions, she focused on trust-building, accountability, and clear communication to bridge the community's divide. During the post-pandemic return to in-person learning, Norwood adopted Scrum management techniques to streamline project execution and enhance team morale, and she is orchestrating the university's third merger in five years with Ashgrove University. Through these critical incidents, President Norwood showed her ability to lead through complexity with strategic vision, while fostering a culture of inclusivity, performance, and growth.

### Case 9: President Catherine Dale, Trinity Heights University

"You have to approach these jobs with love, you really have to care about the community you are in. You have to connect with the community you are in because you have a certain responsibility." (Dale, 2023)

#### *Pathway to Presidency*

**Family Background and Education.** President Dale's upbringing was marked by a familial culture of education and literature, influenced by her parents' strong belief in the power of learning. Her father, a first-generation college student, leveraged the GI Bill to attend a private university in New England, where he earned his degree before obtaining his doctorate. This period of her father's educational journey left a significant imprint on Dale. Her mother, coming from a wealthy background, attended a private women's Catholic college and eventually taught at the above-mentioned private university in New England. The family's love for literature was not just a hobby but a vital component of their daily life. Dale fondly remembers, "my Dad…[over] meals, we would have contests…little quizzes, like fun things, trivial things about literature, literary books." This environment nurtured a competitive yet loving engagement with learning among the siblings. This culture of education was further illustrated by the memory of her father working on his dissertation at the kitchen table, where even though her playful interruptions could have been seen as a distraction, he embraced them. Dale recollected, "My father, I remember very clearly saying, 'no, no, let them stay. This is what motivates me.'" All five sisters pursued higher education, with three attaining at least a master's degree, indicating the profound impact of their parents' values on their choices. Dale herself was the only one to earn a doctorate.

Her educational path led her to a private Jesuit liberal arts college in New England for her undergraduate degree, followed by a master's in French, partly fueled by a desire to return to France. The decision to pursue graduate education abroad was presented to her parents as a plan that aligned with their family values, so they eventually supported the move. Later on, Dale pursued a doctorate at a Midwestern public university, driven by a newfound ambition to teach college students. This educational pathway not only emphasizes the importance of

family influence in shaping educational and professional aspirations but also reflects the specific cultural and intellectual environment that Dale was nurtured in, setting the stage for her eventual career in higher education and her deep commitment to the liberal arts and social justice.

**Mentors.** Long before the college presidency, President Dale was encouraged to pursue faculty roles upon earning her doctorate. She recalled an early encounter with a literary theorist faculty member who, despite her initial intimidation, offered encouragement. He directly affirmed her career aspirations of pursuing teaching at a liberal arts college, saying, "That's what you should do...you go where you want to go". Dale's perseverance through personal challenges was fortified by her mother's advice during a particularly daunting period of her Ph.D. program. Pregnant with twins and managing a toddler, she contemplated postponing her career. Her mother's firm directive, "No…you do it now...if you wait, you won't get back to it," motivated her to continue and reminded her of her father's inspiring legacy.

Years later, Dale's trajectory toward academic administration was unexpectedly shaped by several colleagues' suggestions, highlighting her potential for leadership. A colleague's simple yet impactful statement, "I think you should do it," opened her eyes to new possibilities within educational leadership. This encouragement was echoed by her Dean, who saw potential in her for even greater responsibilities. Her professional growth continued to be supported by mentors who recognized and nurtured her emerging leadership abilities. A significant nudge came from a Vice President she admired, encouraging her to step into a vice presidential role herself. When she later advised Dale to consider a presidency, it only further reinforced her confidence: "If Eileen thinks this is the right fit, it's

the right fit." Further affirmation of her readiness for executive leadership came from a President who, upon learning of her hesitations about a lack of fundraising and financial management experience, reassured her: "Well, none of us do. You hire people...you'll learn it." This casual yet profound advice helped demystify the presidency role for her. Ultimately, the collective wisdom and encouragement from these key figures paved Dale's path to the presidency.

**Challenges, Obstacles and Complications.** Professionally, despite acknowledging her upbringing in an upper-middle-class, predominantly White environment that afforded her certain privileges, President Dale encountered barriers related to gender. These gendered experiences illuminated the broader challenges women face in academic leadership. Her tenure at a private liberal arts college in the South, a women's institution, offered a refreshing contrast to her earlier experiences in male-dominated environments, as Dale articulated the rarity of female leadership in higher education at the time. That environment fostered a sense of possibility that was less tangible in her previous roles, where leadership circles were overwhelmingly male and white. The challenge was not just navigating these personal and professional landscapes but also expanding the scope of what she believed was achievable, pushing against the norms and expectations set by a historically male-dominated academic world.

**Professional Development.** President Dale engaged in a series of targeted professional development programs. Her participation in a women's leadership program at a Southern public university served as a key moment. The program advertised that a majority of the alumni would allegedly ascend to higher level leadership roles within five years. True to this prediction, Dale's career saw a remarkable progression, with her becoming a Vice President

soon after and, seven years later, achieving the title of President. Further honing her administrative skills, she took part in a training program for new Vice Presidents and Deans through the American Council of Education (ACE), designed to prepare emerging leaders for the complexities of higher education administration. Upon assuming the presidency, she also attended the Harvard Seminar for New Presidents, a condensed but intensive course aimed at orienting new leaders to the demands and responsibilities of their roles. These experiences, woven together, provided Dale with the insights, skills, and foresight needed to navigate the challenges of higher education leadership.

**Professional Roles and Inspirations.** President Dale's professional career began when she briefly taught French at a Catholic girls' middle and high school in New England. Despite being offered the chance to stay beyond her maternity leave replacement role, she recognized that "it just wasn't the right level of students for me," indicating a preference for working with college-aged students. Transitioning into higher education, she encountered societal challenges regarding pregnancy in the workplace, noting that "back in the day, people were really weird about pregnancies" and the absence of family leave policies. However, her move to a private liberal arts college in the Midwest marked a positive shift, where the community's openness to family life was refreshingly evident. They welcomed her, asserting, "we love babies," a major contrast to the cautious approach of other institutions at the time. A few years later, her move to the South led to a significant advancement in her career. Initially serving as an Associate Dean under a Vice President she greatly admired, Dale eventually succeeded her mentor as Vice President and Dean. A subsequent recommendation to consider a presidency in Southern California propelled Dale towards her eventual role at Trinity Heights, despite her initial reservations about relocating.

Dale acknowledged “a pretty traditional trajectory to [the] presidency right through the academic side of the house." However, she also emphasized the serendipity and interpersonal nudges that guided her path: "It's with people tapping me in different places and saying, you should try this. Because I would not have seen myself, never in my wildest dreams was this a part of a plan."

### *Familiarization with a New Institution*

**Initial Familiarization.** President Dale's approach to familiarize herself with Trinity Heights University began with a recognition of the unique student population and the institution's distinctive commitment to serving women and promoting social justice. The fact that Trinity Heights had always been led by women presented an environment free of certain barriers and challenges often encountered by them in historically male-led institutions. This aspect, combined with the university's mission, was a major incentive for her taking on the job. She described the East Coast to California transition as "different in every single way," highlighting the cultural and demographic shifts that necessitated a thoughtful approach to leadership. A pivotal moment for Dale was watching a news segment about a graduation program at Trinity Heights that celebrated Latino students. This experience exemplified the cultural differences from her previous positions at PWIs and the profound impact of education on those students and their families. She noted, "I was talking to my daughter, and she said, You're gonna have to learn a lot, because this is completely different from where you've been, and what you know." To bridge these gaps, Dale embarked on a comprehensive effort to learn from the university community, focusing on understanding the needs and challenges of its predominantly first-generation, financially under-resourced, and academically underprepared student body. She engaged in conversations with faculty and

staff, asking questions like, "how does this work?" and "what is it?...how do the finances work?" to deepen her understanding of the university's operations and its mission-driven approach to education.

President Dale's commitment to learning extended beyond just administrative duties. She highlighted the importance of teaching first-year seminars as a means to connect directly with students, describing it as "tremendously helpful to me too". Further, Dale emphasized the value of external associations and networks in providing broader perspectives and insights into the challenges and opportunities facing higher education institutions. Her involvement in various boards and organizations, such as the Association of Independent Colleges and Universities (AICCU) and the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities (NAICU), facilitated access to crucial information and collaborations. Through these multifaceted efforts, President Dale's familiarization with Trinity Heights University was primarily aimed at understanding and serving its unique student population and leveraging both internal and external resources to do so.

**Allies.** At the heart of President Dale's support system was her inherited cabinet, a seasoned team of professionals deeply embedded in the institution's fabric. She noted, "the most recent hire in that cabinet was at 10 years of service." This stability within the cabinet provided key institutional memory. The former president of Trinity Heights also played a significant role in Dale's transition. By being local and actively involved, the former president facilitated key introductions to foundations and supportive donors, effectively passing the torch with endorsements that helped sustain and nurture these crucial relationships. Leaders of foundations expressed their affinity for the university and its mission, offering both warnings and encouragement to ensure its continued success. One

such interaction encapsulated this support, where a foundation head urged Dale not to falter in her stewardship, stating, "this a good place, don't mess it up." Dale also acknowledged the critical role of faculty members as allies, recognizing their willingness to share insights and offer support as being instrumental in her understanding of the university's operational and educational dynamics. She found that "people were very generous with me". Through these alliances, President Dale was better able to navigate the complexities of leading Trinity Heights.

### *Opportunities and Challenges of HSI Status*

Trinity Heights University's designation as a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) has opened doors to federal grants and resources that are pivotal for the advancement of the university's mission, particularly in areas such as STEM education. "We get a lot of grants from the federal government, particularly because of our student body…and we have great success," President Dale explained. The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the importance of Trinity Heights HSI status, as it enabled the institution to access additional funds earmarked for schools serving minority and low-income populations. This financial support was crucial in maintaining the university's operations and ensuring that both employees and students received the necessary assistance during such an unprecedented crisis. The HSI designation, in this context, was not just a label but a lifeline that ensured the university could navigate the challenges posed by the pandemic more effectively. Moreover, President Dale's involvement in a broader network of educational institutions, including her role as the chair of the board of a prominent coalition of women's colleges, a third of which are designated as HSIs, has enriched the university's approach to supporting its diverse student body. The dual status of Trinity Heights as an HSI and an ANNAPSI opens a wide range of

funding opportunities and partnerships that are critical for its continuous growth and development.

### *Critical Incident #1: The Fire on Campus*

During the Fall of 2019, President Dale faced one of the most harrowing crises of her tenure: a fire threatening Trinity Heights University's Tejon campus. The call came early, around four in the morning, signaling a situation far more dire than any previous fire incident the campus had encountered. Unlike the fire in 2017, which allowed for a calculated evacuation, this blaze posed an immediate danger to students on campus. "The fire department wouldn't let us through. And I said I'm the president. They said if you want us to help your students, then you got to stay away, you'll be in the way," she recounted. The evacuation was a high-stakes operation, with students having to walk down the hill to safety. Dale promptly activated the crisis response leadership team, converging at a downtown campus to coordinate relief efforts. This included arranging for student accommodations, addressing immediate needs such as food and clothing, and ensuring students received emotional support. This incident tested the senior leadership team in unprecedented ways, requiring a comprehensive approach to crisis management. Every member played a crucial role, from ensuring students' immediate safety to figuring out logistical challenges such as housing and continuing education. Dale praised her team's adaptability and learning curve during the crisis, acknowledging, "We learned a lot about our styles during [the] crisis, because you know, when you're under incredible pressure, people aren't necessarily at their best."

Dale stressed the importance of maintaining a sense of normalcy amidst chaos. Reflecting on the transition from emergency mode to regular operations, she highlighted the

difficulty of "turning off that adrenaline rush," a crucial step in moving forward and healing as a community. The fire on campus served as a profound learning experience, not just in terms of emergency preparedness, but it also reinforced the need to prioritize student welfare, the value of teamwork under pressure, and the significance of adapting to circumstances with grace and determination. "But you really have to keep a care of community. And you have to…do a priority of needs…and then the other thing I remember saying to my team, one night, we were at my office still working too late. And I said, Okay, we got to go home," Dale reflected, indicating a need to balance between urgent response and self-care. Through it all, the incident not only tested but ultimately strengthened the resolve and unity of Trinity Heights University under President Dale's stewardship.

***Critical Incident #2: COVID***

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, President Dale faced an unparalleled crisis that demanded swift and comprehensive action. The abrupt transition to remote operations posed significant challenges, as the institution had to quickly adapt to an online learning environment, a domain in which they were largely inexperienced due to their traditional in-person teaching model. Dale reflected on the initial disbelief and the rapid mobilization that followed, stating, "we all thought...we're gonna be home for a couple weeks." But it soon became clear that would not be the case. The critical response involved ensuring the continuity of education and support for both students and staff. Dale highlighted the logistical and emotional hurdles, from setting up remote workspaces to addressing the financial strains of reimbursing room and board fees. One of the most significant aspects of the crisis management was the emphasis on community care. The institution implemented measures to ensure no student or employee was left behind. From loaning laptops and

hotspots to reassigning dining service employees to alternative roles, the response was characterized by creativity and compassion. "We didn't want any [campus] employee to be laid off. So, we didn't have to," Dale remarked.

She also praised the faculty's dedication and adaptability during this period. Their commitment to student success was evident as they navigated the new terrain of online teaching with determination. "I've never seen such a fluid transition... Our faculty just did it," she said, proud to assert that no student's education was compromised. However, the financial implications of the pandemic were profound, with the institution facing reduced revenues while striving to maintain its commitment to every community member. Despite these challenges, Dale remained focused on the long-term recovery, acknowledging that "it's doable, but it's multi-year." The overarching theme of Dale's leadership during the crisis was the prioritization of the community's well-being, guided by the institution's founding mission. She concluded by reflecting on the responsibility of a leader to care for the community's welfare, stating, "I think that's really the responsibility of a leader."

***Critical Incident #3: Private School Survival***

President Dale's discussion on the critical issue of private school survival delved into the multifaceted challenges faced by higher education institutions in adapting to a rapidly changing landscape. She described an academic landscape where traditional age college students are declining, competition is fierce, and costs are continually rising. This situation is compounded by the need for increased support services for students, including counseling and psychological services to address the complexities of their lives. Dale noted, "the costs go up, because we…need to have case managers for students now...students' lives are complicated". She highlighted the prevalent and wide-ranging needs of students, from basic

necessities like food and housing to academic support, emphasizing the importance of enabling student success amidst financial constraints. "We're feeding students, we're housing students, we're trying to figure out...how do they pay for books? How do we help them so they can succeed?" she mentioned, pointing out the high proportion of her students receiving Pell Grants.

Faced with the dual challenges of rising operational costs and a student body with limited financial resources, Dale discussed strategies to ensure the institution's financial health and the well-being of its employees. The focus is on growing revenues while still prioritizing student retention and success. She shared an innovative approach through a partnership with a higher education consulting firm called Credo that offers to improve retention by 5% over five years, which would lead to increased revenue and better student outcomes. This partnership aimed to transform the institution's culture by identifying and removing impediments to student success. Dale reflected on the process of cultural change, acknowledging the challenges of managing and leading change in an environment where people may be resistant. In addition to retention efforts, there has been a push towards differentiating the institution in the marketplace and attracting a broader student base, including graduate and adult degree seekers. This critical incident encapsulates the complexity of navigating higher education's future from the perspective of a small, private, Catholic, liberal arts institution shaped by financial pressures, changing demographics, and the imperative to provide comprehensive support to a diverse student body. President Dale's leadership approach, focused on innovation, partnership, and cultural transformation, offers insights into how institutions can survive and thrive in an evolving educational landscape.

***Summary and Analysis***

President Dale's life-long commitment to education was shaped by her upbringing and a family that valued learning above all. Her leadership journey was positively influenced by mentors who saw her potential early on, guiding her from academia into more strategic and administrative roles. Upon her arrival at Trinity Heights, she focused on understanding the institution and its predominantly first-generation student body, as well as leading with love and a sense of responsibility. During her presidency, Dale has worked to integrate the university's mission of serving women and promoting social justice into every aspect of its operation, leveraging the opportunities, and addressing the challenges that come with its HSI status. Through her unique personal experiences and professional growth, Dale is an example of a leader that is empathetic, and mission driven.

In the autumn of 2019, President Dale led through a crisis unlike any before at Trinity Heights University when a wildfire threatened the Tejon campus. The urgency of this fire demanded an immediate and well-coordinated response. The evacuation required swift action, with students needing to walk to safety, reflective of the dire circumstances. Dale's assembly of the crisis leadership team downtown to plan the university's response showed the bureaucratic and collegial aspects of organizational behavior. The team tackled everything from arranging student accommodations and addressing basic needs to providing emotional support, demonstrating a systemic response to crisis resolution. Dale lauded her team's flexibility and readiness, acknowledging the pressure-filled environment's impact on decision-making and team dynamics. A major part of this crisis involved the return to normalcy, a challenge Dale pointed out, particularly in managing her leadership team. Her reflections on the importance of community care, prioritizing needs, and the necessity of rest for the leadership team point to her approach in university leadership. This incident not only

served as a test of emergency preparedness and response but also as a lesson in teamwork and the importance of prioritizing student welfare above all.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, President Dale steered Trinity Heights University through unprecedented challenges, transitioning quickly from traditional classroom teaching to remote learning. This crisis required not only logistical adjustments, like facilitating online classes and ensuring students and staff had necessary resources, but also maintaining a focus on community care. Dale worked to ensure no member of the campus community was left without support, reassigning roles to avoid layoffs and providing essential technology for remote access. The faculty's rapid adaptation to online teaching speaks to their commitment to student success, which ultimately allowed for a seamless shift without sacrificing the quality of education. Despite the financial strains from refunding room and board and facing reduced revenue, Dale held firm in her commitment to the community's well-being, focusing on a multi-year recovery plan. Her leadership through the pandemic blended bureaucratic, collegial, and systemic responses, reinforced by symbolic behavior reflective of the campus' mission shared values.

In confronting the existential challenges facing private higher education, President Dale tackled the issue of dwindling traditional student populations, intensifying competition, and escalating operational costs. She articulated the increasing complexity of student needs, ranging from academic support to basic necessities, all of which require more services and resources. Amid these pressures, Dale's strategy focused on systemic and bureaucratic innovations to enhance financial stability and student retention. A key initiative was partnering with Credo, a consultancy promising to boost retention by 5% over five years, which would result in increased revenue and student outcomes. This collaboration also

aimed at cultural transformation within Trinity Heights University that would be conducive to student success. Additionally, she explored diversifying the student base to include more graduate and adult learners, updating the institution's offerings to meet broader market demands. Through these efforts, President Dale exhibited political skills in working through the institution's challenges through systemic changes and bureaucratic management to secure the university's future while still maintaining its core mission.

In the face of a wildfire crisis, President Dale showed strong crisis management by leading a swift and comprehensive emergency response at Trinity Heights University, speaking to the significance of preparedness, teamwork, and the importance of student welfare. During the COVID-19 pandemic, she led a rapid transition to remote learning, allowing for uninterrupted education and support for the campus community, pointing to a prioritization of the academic, personal, and financial well-being of each of her constituents. Finally, tackling the sustainability challenges in private higher education, Dale initiated strategic partnerships and innovations aimed at financial stability and improving student retention. Her approach to leading through these critical incidents revealed an ability to adapt to changing educational landscapes while staying true to the university's core mission and values.

### Case 10: President Patrick Lawson, Faithway University

"Be slow to anger and be quick to listen." (Lawson, 2023)

#### *Pathway to Presidency*

**Family Background and Education.** Born into a working-class family in the late 1950s, President Lawson's path to becoming the first in his family to attend college was marked by encouragement but also by the distinct lack of a blueprint for navigating academic life. "It's

always difficult for first-generation families because the student may have encouragement from the family, but they don't understand what they've gone through," President Lawson reflected, highlighting the unique hurdles he faced not coming from an academic background. Despite these challenges, President Lawson was not deterred. His academic journey began in earnest in Southern California, where amidst the backdrop of large, inner-city schools, he discovered a passion for learning that transcended his early educational experiences. This passion for knowledge blossomed in high school when a teacher introduced him to philosophy, sparking a curiosity that would guide his future. "I started reading philosophy when I was in ninth or 10th grade... I was going to be a doctor," President Lawson recalled, outlining his initial ambition to enter the medical profession. However, his enrollment at a Southern California public university as a biology major was the start of a profound transformation. A significant faith experience shifted his aspirations from medicine to the humanities, blending his interests in philosophy, ethics, and the desire to help others.

President Lawson's academic journey took him to Faithway, where he began anew, focusing on becoming a minister. This change in direction was emblematic of his evolving understanding of his place in the world and his contributions to it. Pursuing Faithway's inaugural master's in leadership program in 1983 marked a pivotal moment, stirring a realization that his calling was in leadership. "Something really stirred in me that this is what I want to do," he explains, indicating a shift towards preparing for leadership within the church. However, his academic pursuits did not end there. President Lawson furthered his education with another master's degree and a Ph.D. in ethics. "Studying ethics and political philosophy prepared me to function as a professor and as a faculty member for all those

years," he notes, reflecting on the preparation these fields provided for his future roles in academia and beyond. Despite the initial appearance of diverging from his family's educational background—his parents not having attended college while other relatives did—President Lawson acknowledges the support and indirect influence of his extended family, including uncles, aunts, and others in the education sector. This nuanced family dynamic, combined with his own experiences and the challenges of being a first-generation college student, shaped his journey through academia and leadership, culminating in a rich, faith-based career.

**Mentors.** President Lawson's journey through academia and into leadership was significantly shaped by a network of mentors and the steadfast support of his wife, each playing a crucial role in his personal and professional development. As he navigated the challenges and opportunities of being a first-generation college student and aspiring academic, the guidance and encouragement from these key figures were instrumental in his growth. His PhD mentor, Dr. Dan Moore, memorably steered him towards educational leadership roles. Dr. Moore suggested, "You probably ought to be running an organization, you ought to be running a school." This recommendation was tempered with a caution against running a typical college or university, hinting instead at a path more aligned with Lawson's interests in seminary or divinity school leadership. Dr. Moore's mentorship extended beyond academic advising to include executive mentoring, particularly after Lawson shared his aspirations to lead an institution. Moore's support was unequivocal; he dedicated three years to mentoring Lawson in first-chair academic leadership, an experience Lawson described as "a total gift, incredible." Moore's influence was so significant that he

even spoke at Lawson's presidential inauguration, underscoring the depth of their mentor-mentee relationship.

Lawson's commitment to seeking out mentors who would challenge him rather than merely affirm his ideas was a deliberate strategy for personal and intellectual growth. "I've sought people who will...say no," Lawson recounted, highlighting his preference for candid and constructive feedback. This approach helped him to refine his thinking and expand his perspectives. The encouragement to pursue a PhD came at a transformative moment in a small office, where a professor's enthusiastic support convinced Lawson of his potential to contribute significantly to the academic world. "I'll never forget it... that was like a moment of...not only could I do this, I probably should do this now," Lawson said, reflecting on the profound impact of this mentor's confidence in him. Lastly, one of the most important people in Lawson's life, his wife, was a constant source of support and partnership. Together for 44 years, she was integrally involved in every step of his journey, from his academic pursuits to navigating the presidency. Lawson took a year off from his studies to care for her, underscoring the priority of their relationship over his career ambitions. "That sacrifice of a year of my program for her was a continuation of the relationship that we'd had before," Lawson reflected, emphasizing the mutual support that has been a cornerstone of their marriage.

**Professional Roles and Inspirations.** President Lawson's career began with an immediate dive into inner-city church work in Southern California right after graduating. This experience, according to Lawson, was the "right fit" for him, marking the start of a long tenure in local church ministry that spanned over three decades, with 23 of those years in a senior pastor role. His passion for teaching and desire to impact communities extended

beyond local church ministries to international development efforts. Lawson became involved in sustainable agriculture initiatives in Western Kenya, focusing on clean water access and education for girls—a testament to his commitment to transforming regions through practical and sustainable solutions. "My whole goal in Kenya was to get girls into school," Lawson shared, highlighting the broader impact of his work on community development and education.

Simultaneously, Lawson nurtured a strong desire to teach, bridging his pastoral work with academic pursuits. He began teaching in the late 1980s, and soon expanded his academic involvement to an interdenominational Evangelical Christian seminary in Southern California in the late 1990s. Overlapping his pastoral and academic roles, Lawson amassed 25 years of teaching experience alongside his 31 years in ministry. This blend of leadership in both the church and the classroom equipped him with a broad set of skills for higher education leadership, from managing complicated systems to organizing volunteers and handling budgets. Lawson's transition from faculty to administrative roles in higher education was marked by a return to Faithway as a Dean in 2012, following a brief departure from his faculty post in 2009. His move into administration was propelled by a sense of constriction in the undergraduate classroom, driving him to seek roles that allowed for a broader impact. The departure of his predecessor in 2013 opened the door for Lawson to step into the presidency after a national search, despite having only one year of higher education administration experience prior.

The leap to presidency was fueled by a confluence of Lawson's interests, passions, and the integration of faith and learning—a core value that had always appealed to him. His leadership is characterized by a service-oriented ethos, deeply rooted in the faith-based

institutions he has served. "That heart to serve...is really inculcated in the ethos of faith-based institutions," Lawson remarked. Despite experiencing what he described as a bit of imposter syndrome, Lawson's journey to the presidency was not about seeking power but about maximizing his unique blend of skills and passions. His commitment to service, love for students, and the desire to leverage his "tools in the shed" for greater impact reflect a leader deeply invested in the transformative potential of education and community development.

### *Familiarization with a New Institution*

**Initial Familiarization and Transitional Challenges.** Upon assuming the presidency, President Lawson embarked on a deliberate process of familiarizing himself with the perspective and responsibilities that the role demanded. Understanding that an organization appears differently from each vantage point, he was cautious not to assume that his experiences as a student and professor would seamlessly translate into effective leadership from the president's office. "An organization looks different from every vantage point," Lawson noted, emphasizing the importance of reacquainting himself with the organization from his new role at the helm. To navigate this transition, Lawson developed what he calls a "priority frame," a model that categorizes the essential components of the university's function: organizational functions, institutional priorities, and operational values. This framework was born out of his need to ground his philosophical inclinations into practical, strategic leadership. "I had to be able to articulate my thinking in a way that drives strategy, deep understanding [and] buy-in," he explained. Central to Lawson's priority frame is the concept of student learning, surrounded by student development, operations, and infrastructure. He articulated a holistic view of the university's mission, where student

learning and development are interdependent, supported by the operational functions and physical infrastructure that enable these core activities. This comprehensive understanding underscores Lawson's recognition of the multifaceted nature of higher education, extending beyond academic instruction to include the broader student experience and well-being.

Lawson also addressed the challenge of navigating the power dynamics inherent in his new role. He sought to bridge, rather than erase, the gap between his position and those of various stakeholders within the university, from IT directors to food service workers. This approach reflects his commitment to maintaining the necessary hierarchical structure while fostering an inclusive, collaborative environment. "How do I bridge that gap? I don't want to eliminate the gap; I want to bridge [it] because the gap is important," he stated. But the transition to presidency also involved a challenging redefinition of his relationship with the faculty. Lawson found it crucial to establish that he was no longer just a peer or an "Uber professor," but rather a leader with a broader institutional vision. This process required reconfiguring long-standing collegial relationships into a new dynamic: "It's taken me almost 10 years to get them back."

**Campus Culture.** Faithway University's campus culture is deeply rooted in its core values of truth, virtue, and service, established since its inception in the early 20th century. As a faith-based institution, Faithway navigates the unique challenges of integrating academic rigor with spiritual values without succumbing to the pitfalls common to some faith-based institutions. President Lawson emphasizes the importance of distinguishing the operational dynamics of a university from those of a church, highlighting the performance-based environment essential to both students and staff within the university setting. This

distinction is crucial in fostering an environment where academic and personal development can thrive in tandem with spiritual growth.

Faithway serves a vulnerable student population, with 50% Pell Grant eligibility and 34% first-generation college students, necessitating a business model that accommodates low net tuition revenue while ensuring retention and success. The university's commitment to affordability and accessibility is evident, with a 2021 report ranking it as the seventh most affordable among four-year nonprofit private schools in California. This achievement aligns with Lawson's vision to make Faithway the leading source of Christian higher education in the state, focusing on access, affordability, success, and facilities. The university's demographic has evolved significantly in recent decades, transitioning from a predominantly white institution to one where two-thirds of the student body are from non-majority backgrounds. This transformation reflects Faithway's intentional efforts to diversify its campus and embrace the global growth of the Pentecostal movement, to which it is closely tied. The Assemblies of God, the founding body, has a bound and unbreakable relationship with Faithway, though the university operates independently to meet regional accreditation requirements. This affiliation enriches the campus culture, providing a foundation that values experiential faith and engages with a broad spectrum of Christian traditions. Faithway's roots in the Pentecostal tradition have also fostered a long-standing commitment to gender diversity in leadership, reflecting the movement's egalitarian approach to ministry roles. Since its early days as an institution focused on preparing both women and men for ministry, Faithway has upheld the principle that leadership positions, both within the church and the broader community, should be accessible to all, regardless of gender. In summary, Faithway University's campus culture is a testament to its innovative approach to integrating

faith and academic excellence, and its commitment to diversity and inclusivity. Under President Lawson's leadership, the university continues to navigate the challenges of higher education with a business model that prioritizes student success while staying true to its spiritual roots and mission.

### *Perspectives on HSI Status*

Achieving HSI status in 2013-2014, Faithway quickly demonstrated its alignment with the objectives underlying such designation, notably through the swift acquisition of a Title V grant, which was a product of proactively serving Hispanic students well before official recognition. Understanding the cultural nuances and the importance of family in the Hispanic community, Faithway has established services and programs that not only support the individual student but also embrace their families. This approach acknowledges the communal and familial dimensions of education for Hispanic students, contrasting with more individualistic orientations. To address practical needs, Faithway opened a Career Closet, providing professional attire for students attending job interviews, reflecting an understanding of the financial challenges many face. The university has also evolved to accommodate a growing commuter population, including the establishment of a commuter kitchen. Further, the Josue Menchaca Center for Hispanic Leadership plays a key role as a support and research hub, providing academic and community support for Hispanic students, who now represent a sizable portion of the incoming class. Faithway has also implemented initiatives like asynchronous Spanish language online programs and bilingual success and support services.

President Lawson acknowledges the opportunities and challenges accompanying Faithway's HSI status. The university's focus extends beyond providing education to

embracing entire families and communities. This commitment is mirrored in efforts to address food and housing insecurities through initiatives like the Living Well food pantry. One of the lingering challenges in reflecting the diversity of the student body is within the faculty and staff composition. Efforts to diversify the faculty, specifically, have been met with resistance from some quarters, yet Faithway persists in creating a qualified pool of candidates that reflects the student population's diversity. President Lawson, self-described as "an old white guy," has embraced the learning curve presented by leading a diverse institution. He emphasizes the importance of professional humility and a teachable spirit in recognizing and deploying his privilege in ways that uplift others. This approach has been instrumental in navigating the complexities of serving a diverse student population and steering Faithway University towards its vision of being a leading source of Christian higher education in California, deeply committed to access, affordability, and success.

### *Critical Incident #1: From Insider to Presidency*

President Lawson's transition from being an institutional insider to the President of Faithway University was marked by profound personal and professional transformation, underscored by a weekend of doubt in his second year. Faced with the cumulative losses of long-standing friendships and the stark realization of the leadership's isolating path, Lawson contemplated the sustainability of his emotional well-being in the role. "I don't know if I can feel this way indefinitely," he confessed, grappling with the notion that leadership, especially transitioning from a familiar faculty member to the president, necessitated navigating a landscape of disappointment and redefined relationships. This transition was not merely a shift in responsibilities but a profound reorientation of his relationship with the university and its faculty. Lawson had to recalibrate his approach, understanding that the

mission of the institution could not be secondary to individual faculty needs. The challenge was further compounded by the fact that he rose from within the ranks, transforming from a peer to a leader, altering the group dynamics and expectations previously established. For years, faculty meetings were arenas of silent battles, where professional disagreements strained personal bonds, leading to a grief process Lawson likened to mourning.

Lawson's insider perspective was both a boon and a bane as he transitioned to leadership. Known and appreciated within the community, he faced the daunting task of redefining his identity within the institution. The tenure system, embodying the loudest voices of resistance, often from those least inclined to embrace change, presented another layer of complexity in fostering institutional growth and adaptation. The strategy Lawson employed to bridge these divides was one of individual and departmental engagement, seeking to build consensus and shared vision rather than circumventing the established faculty system. This approach, while slow and fraught with challenges, eventually began to yield a semblance of mutual respect and understanding. The acknowledgment of operating in good faith, even in the face of disagreement, marked a turning point in his leadership, gradually winning over some of his staunchest critics.

Nevertheless, the path was strewn with personal sacrifices, notably the loss of close professional relationships. The shunning he experienced from colleagues, once friends, underscored the emotional toll of leadership. Lawson had to learn to navigate these waters from his new vantage point, offering care and consideration from a distance, a balancing act of professional integrity and personal empathy. By the fourth year, a tentative peace was brokered, facilitated by key faculty retirements and a collective recognition of the need for change. The faculty began to see Lawson's actions as grounded in good faith, leading to a

more collaborative environment, albeit still peppered with challenges. This newfound equilibrium was not the result of sweeping reforms but of painstakingly built bridges and negotiated spaces of mutual respect and understanding.

### *Critical Incident #2: The Prioritization*

In the fifth year of President Lawson's tenure at Faithway University, a critical and transformative initiative colloquially known as "The Prioritization" was undertaken. This initiative aimed to streamline the university's operational footprint by evaluating and making necessary adjustments to processes, programs, and personnel. Drawing inspiration and guidance from successful precedents within the academic community, notably from the experience of another private Southern California Christian university, Faithway embarked on this journey with a clear vision and a community-wide approach. The process was structured around two main teams: one focusing on academic functions and the other on staff and operational functions outside of academia. This structure ensured comprehensive evaluation across all major business units of the university, fostering a balanced and integrated review process. Central to this evaluation was a rubric of nine questions, designed to assess each department's alignment with the university's mission, academic quality, financial sustainability, and strategic innovation among other critical factors.

The goal of The Prioritization was ambitious yet necessary; the university aimed to cut approximately $3 million from its budget, not out of immediate financial crisis, but in anticipation of future challenges in the higher education landscape. Through this meticulous process, more than 30 employees, including faculty members, were identified for potential departure in alignment with the university's strategic realignment. This decision, though difficult, was executed with transparency and fairness, offering generous severance

packages to those affected, recognizing their service and contribution to Faithway. The aftermath of The Prioritization was a period of uncertainty and discomfort within the university community, with some likening it to a catastrophic event. However, the unforeseen advent of COVID-19 underscored the prescience and necessity of these hard choices. The pandemic brought unprecedented challenges to higher education institutions worldwide, yet Faithway was uniquely positioned to navigate this storm without resorting to layoffs or salary cuts, thanks to the proactive measures taken during The Prioritization. This period of trial unexpectedly turned the tide of opinion among Lawson's critics within the faculty. Many who had been vocal in their opposition came forward to acknowledge the wisdom of his foresight, apologizing for their initial resistance and recognizing the positive impact of these difficult decisions on the university's ability to weather the pandemic.

### *Critical Incident #3: Spaces and Support*

Faithway has established a robust system of academic, student life, health, and wellness support, leading to strong graduation rates and vibrant intercultural student programming. Clubs such as El Puente serve as crucial spaces for Latino students, fostering a sense of belonging and community. The university celebrates this diversity through cultural graduation celebrations, allowing students to honor their heritage within the broader context of their academic achievements. However, the summer of 2020, following George Floyd's murder, brought unprecedented challenges and a period of introspection for Faithway. While the university focused on supporting its African American students, members of El Puente approached President Lawson with insightful observations about their own community's needs. They highlighted a perceived disproportionate level of attention, not to detract from the support for Black students but to raise awareness of their own

unvoiced needs within the Faithway community. This dialogue was a pivotal moment for Lawson, revealing that silence should not be mistaken for the absence of need.

In response, Faithway reinvigorated the Josue Menchaca Center for Hispanic Leadership. Named after a prominent figure in Pentecostal ministry, the center had seen various iterations over the years but received renewed focus under Lawson's presidency to address the specific needs of Hispanic students more effectively. This was part of a broader effort to ensure that all students felt valued and supported, recognizing the unique challenges and contributions of each community within the university. Dr. Pedro Mejia, serving as the chief diversity officer at the time, played a critical role in navigating these challenges, offering leadership and support not just to the Latino and Black communities but to the entire diverse student body. This period underscored the importance of providing a coherent understanding of diversity initiatives to all constituents of the university, from students to donors and trustees. Through deploying key leadership figures and developing new processes and training, President Lawson strived to bolster a learning organization where every student can feel an integral sense of belonging and significance.

### *Critical Incident #4: Profiled on Campus*

This incident involved a campus safety officer's interaction with a Black student, which was perceived as profiling, highlighting the delicate balance between security measures and the dignity of the university's diverse student body. In response to the incident, President Lawson, leveraging his strong relationships with Black students, took immediate action. He deployed Dr. Rita Bonet, the university's Chief Diversity Officer and Dean of the School of Theology and Ministry, to address the situation. Dr. Bonet's background and insights were instrumental in navigating the complexities of racial and cultural identities

within the university community, especially in the wake of heightened awareness around racial justice issues following the summer of 2020. The profiling incident catalyzed a broader examination of campus safety protocols and diversity initiatives at Faithway. Under Dr. Bonet's guidance, the university revisited its racial justice action plan and reinforced the activities of the university Diversity Committee, which had been active for decades. These efforts were part of a comprehensive strategy to ensure that all members of the campus community feel seen, respected, and safe.

Communication and transparency were key components of the administration's response. Regular updates were provided to President Lawson by the Chief Diversity Officer and the Vice President for Student Affairs, ensuring that progress on addressing the incident and its broader implications was closely monitored. Additionally, President Lawson established direct feedback mechanisms, encouraging students to communicate openly about their experiences and perceptions of campus safety and inclusivity. The current Student Government Association president, Jay Herrera, exemplified this open line of communication, offering unfiltered insights into the student body's sentiments and concerns. This intelligence gathering from within the student community allowed the administration to stay attuned to the nuances of student experiences and to adapt its strategies accordingly.

### *Critical Incident #5: COVID*

Amidst the widespread disruptions caused by COVID-19, Faithway University, under President Lawson's leadership, showcased remarkable agility in navigating the crisis, ensuring that no member of the university community was left behind. The university's commitment to student welfare was particularly evident in its handling of housing and financial support during the spring of 2020. Understanding the diverse needs and challenges

of its student body, which includes a significant percentage of Pell Grant recipients, the university implemented measures such as housing refunds and other financial aids to alleviate the students' burdens. For those unable to return home due to unsafe or unavailable living conditions, Faithway ensured continued residence through an application process, maintaining a 50% dormitory capacity in compliance with health guidelines.

The transition to online education marked a significant shift for Faithway, catalyzing the adoption of hybrid and flexible teaching modes. Resistance to online instruction dissipated almost overnight, with faculty members embracing digital platforms and tools to continue delivering quality education. For President Lawson, the pandemic also presented unique leadership challenges and opportunities for personal growth. Accustomed to face-to-face interactions, Lawson found navigating communication in a virtual environment particularly challenging. The experience of leading through Zoom calls, unable to "read the room" in traditional ways, prompted him to develop new strategies for effective communication and problem-solving. Through proactive management, innovative approaches to education, and a focus on inclusive support, Faithway not only navigated the challenges of the pandemic but emerged with strengthened bonds and a renewed sense of purpose.

### *Summary and Analysis*

Under President Patrick Lawson's presidency, Faithway University has flourished, guided by principles of empathy and patience for students and other campus constituents. A first-generation college student, his academic journey, initially aimed at medicine, pivoted to the humanities after a significant faith experience. This led him to roles in ministry and eventually academia. Lawson's path was influenced by key mentors, including Dr. Dan

Moore, and backed by his wife's unwavering support, pointing to the collaborative nature of his journey to higher education leadership. Upon reaching the presidency at Faithway, Lawson crafted a framework to recalibrate his understanding of the university's mission, placing a strong emphasis on student learning and development. Further, Lawson has actively worked to fulfill Faithway's commitment as a Hispanic Serving Institution, embracing the needs of its diverse student body while pushing for faculty diversity to mirror student demographics. This journey, from navigating personal educational hurdles to leading a faith-based university, speaks to Lawson's inclusive, service-oriented leadership.

From a familiar face within Faithway to its President, Lawson experienced an intense period of introspection and doubt, particularly during a weekend in his second year at the helm. Transitioning from colleague to leader required not just a shift in job description but a major realignment in relationships across the campus. Lawson wrestled with the solitude of the presidency. His rise from the ranks introduced unique challenges, particularly in pushing forward with institutional management while nurturing long-held faculty relationships. Lawson set out on a mission of dialogue and mutual respect, prioritizing collective vision over unilateral decision-making. Through this, he gradually began to mend the fabric of trust, transforming initial skepticism into a cautious acknowledgment of his leadership's intent and integrity. Lawson began to turn the tide. By his fourth year, the hostility had begun to ease, aided by the natural cycle of retirements and a growing recognition among the faculty that he was leading in good faith. This period of transformation is an example of Lawson's political and collegial abilities in bridging the gap between his past friendships and the demands of presidential leadership.

In his fifth year leading Faithway, President Lawson spearheaded an initiative colloquially referred to as "The Prioritization," which was a comprehensive review aimed at refining the university's operations across the board. This re-examination was not fueled by any immediate financial duress but was a nod to the evolving challenges of the academic sector. Leveraging experiences from similar institutions, Lawson deployed two dedicated teams to look at the academic and non-academic functions against a set of nine evaluative questions. These questions were crafted to measure alignment with Faithway's mission, academic quality, gauge financial viability, and encourage strategic innovation. The objective was ambitious and preemptive—to identify and implement about $3 million in budget adjustments. The process concluded with the identification of over 30 faculty and staff for potential termination in service of the university's strategic direction. Recognizing the contribution of these individuals, Faithway offered equitable severance packages, pointing to Lawson’s valuing of respect and fairness. While "The Prioritization" initially caused concern across the campus, when the COVID-19 pandemic hit, the initiative proved to be quite wise. Faithway's proactive stance ended up contributing to the institution's stability—avoiding layoffs or salary reductions. This shifted perceptions among President Lawson's detractors within the faculty, with some extending apologies and acknowledging the foresightedness of his actions.

In the wake of George Floyd's murder in the summer of 2020, Faithway was facing introspection around issues of race. Amidst the institution's efforts to support Black students, President Lawson had an eye-opening dialogue with members of El Puente, a campus club for Latino students. These students voiced concerns about a perceived imbalance in support, sparking a realization for Lawson: silence from a community does not equate to the absence

of need. This moment of clarity led to the revitalization of the Josue Menchaca Center for Hispanic Leadership, named after a key Latino figure in Pentecostal ministry. The center's rejuvenation, under Lawson's leadership, aimed to meet the needs of Latino students more effectively. Dr. Pedro Mejia, the Chief Diversity Officer, was key in addressing these challenges, offering leadership that extended beyond Latino and Black students to encompass the entire student body. This period was transformative for Faithway. By engaging in a dialogue that brought unvoiced needs to the forefront and reinvigorating the Josue Menchaca Center, Lawson showed a commitment to creating spaces where every student feels valued and supported. This incident is an example of Lawson’s utilization of collegiality, politics, and symbolism to support a culture of belonging within the university community.

In addressing an incident of profiling on campus by a campus safety officer towards a Black student, President Lawson leveraged the collegial and systemic dimensions of organizational behavior, with a secondary reliance on bureaucratic processes. This situation called for a sensitive and immediate response, for which President Lawson enlisted Dr. Rita Bonet, the Chief Diversity Officer. Dr. Bonet's role was crucial in addressing the incident, given her expertise in managing racial and cultural sensitivities within the university setting. The incident also initiated a wider evaluation of the university's diversity and inclusion practices, leading to a renewal of the racial justice action plan and the Diversity Committee's efforts. There was also a policy of open dialogue implemented, with regular progress reports to President Lawson from key administrative officers. Additionally, President Lawson prioritized direct engagement with students, encouraging a culture where feedback on campus safety and other issues was actively sought and valued. The collaboration with the

Student Government Association, particularly its president Jay Herrera, provided a channel for Beal to understand student perspectives in order to improve upon the university's response mechanisms. Through strategic delegation, collaborative leadership, open communication, and a systemic approach to diversity and inclusion, President Lawson and his team worked towards a campus where every individual would feel respected and safe.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, President Lawson focused on the well-being and continued education of the entire university community. Recognizing the immediate impact on students, many who were Pell Grant recipients, the university quickly engaged in measures to mitigate financial strain, including issuing housing refunds and providing additional financial assistance. Faithway offered housing to students without safe or available alternatives, carefully managing dormitory capacity to adhere to health regulations. This period also accelerated Faithway's shift towards online and hybrid learning models, challenging faculty, and students to adapt to new forms of instruction. The faculty's quick pivot to digital tools showed their commitment to uninterrupted learning and spoke to the collegiate and bureaucratic strengths of the university's response. For President Lawson personally, the pandemic tested and improved his leadership skills, pushing him to find new ways to communicate and connect with his team and the student body in a predominantly virtual world. By prioritizing the needs of students and staff, and embracing new methodologies in education and administration, Faithway, under President Lawson's guidance, not only survived the pandemic but emerged with a deeper sense of community and purpose.

In his journey from faculty member to the leader of Faithway University, President Lawson worked through major personal and professional shifts in his relationships with

others on campus. His leadership through challenging moments—like "The Prioritization" initiative, addressing systemic racial issues, managing a profiling incident on campus, and steering the university through the COVID-19 pandemic—showed his skill at combining collegial consultation with strategic decision-making. Lawson's approach, consisting of ongoing introspection and inclusive leadership, gradually transformed initial faculty skepticism into an endorsement of his vision. The profiling incident and the resulting revitalization of the Josue Menchaca Center for Hispanic Leadership illustrates his dedication to a campus environment where every student feels valued. And, throughout the pandemic, Lawson's focus on community well-being and adaptability in education represented the perseverance and purpose at the heart of Faithway's mission. The diversity of these critical incidents and their respective responses all seem to indicate that Lawson's presidential leadership draws from an exceptionally wide toolkit of organizational behavior.

### Case 11: President Antonio Vega, Sunstone University

> "In the limited time that I'm here, I want to do a very good job. So, I'm going to use every tool and every person, every piece of wisdom in order to be effective in the role–if only to hand it off in a better condition than it was given to me" (Vega, 2023)

#### *Pathway to Presidency*

**Family Background and Education.** President Vega' story begins with his parents who migrated from Mexico to the United States and settled in the Southwest. They had no formal education, but his father was a farm worker and his mother worked in a "garment sweatshop". Vega's parents had six children and bought a house in the early 1960's where his mother still lives. Because of where he grew up, Vega recognized education as one of the few paths of social mobility "other than less socially acceptable ways." While several of his

siblings attended college, they each dropped out and Vega was the first person in his family to graduate. He attended California universities for his bachelors, masters, and doctoral degrees. Vega also proudly paid for his college education, through his military service and other self-initiated sources. “My parents were too poor to help. And I think, in many ways, I was too proud to ask,” he recalled.

The further President Vega progressed in education, the more politicized his thinking became regarding education. Not politicized in terms of Democrats or Republicans, but in terms of the impact of representing his community in elite spaces in higher education, “and an understanding that [his] place…and possible contribution to the space of…elite education had an effect beyond [his] own benefit.” This was based on the contributions he created just by being in the room, often as the only one from a working-class Mexican background who viewed the issues discussed through a different lens than his predominantly White classmates. And it was never lost on Vega that his presence was a result of the sacrifices of others. “As I studied more, read more, learned more, and listened,” he recollected, “I became very aware of that.”

Prior to President Vega’s doctorate, he taught high school for a few years and witnessed the positive influence teachers could have on students. That led him to think that “with a PhD, I could get involved in the training of teachers and have an even greater impact, particularly as it relates to how teachers position themselves to work with disadvantaged, bilingual, bicultural, [and] marginalized populations.” While working towards his PhD, he met many brilliant and dynamic people who valued issues of access and equity, students with “great promise and ambition and hope and skills.” It was the first time he was surrounded by such a critically minded group. Vega attributes this period as “one of

the most influential periods of [his] intellectual life" because of these interactions and experiences.

Importantly, President Vega attended an institution that had a sizable core of Latino and Latina faculty members, as well as a few high-ranking administrators. Yet his inner circle of friends still felt there was a hostility in that "there was an assumption about [their] abilities" from others in the university. This group of classmates proved to be pivotal to Vega's success, who said it would have been difficult to finish without their support. One close friend, a classmate with a wife and children, was especially impactful. At one point in the doctoral program, Vega was struggling, and this friend reached out. "You know, what you don't get, what you don't understand, and the reason you feel so bad and so inadequate, and the reason you feel like such an imposter is because they're asking you questions…[and] they're asking you because they don't know the answer… you bring a body of knowledge that…this institution lacks." It was the first time anybody had ever said anything like that to Vega. The idea that his background and body of knowledge was as valuable as any other student was empowering and bolstered his confidence in the classroom.

**Mentors.** One of President Vega's earliest professional mentors was a senior Latino university administrator. Vega worked in his office as a Teaching Assistant and Research Assistant, helping in any capacity, including developing summer programs for migrant students. Learning under him offered a glimpse into how administrators can facilitate "greater degrees of equity…access and…social justice." This is when he began to think about pursuing academic administration. However, Vega asserted that there were many folks that helped him along his professional journey–and they were not always people of color. He

also had White mentors, men, and women, "who saw something in [him] that they wanted to support." These folks, in addition to his classmates, were key to his progression and without their support, Vega believes his path could have been drastically different.

Later in President Vega's professional career, after he had been a university administrator for some time, he was encouraged by another president from the South (who he had worked with in the past) to pursue a university presidency. And while this president would tell him over and again "when you become president," Vega thought he was just being polite and did not mean it. But considering the president was such an important mentor, eventually he realized that the feeling was sincere. "This will be good for you," the president told him, "at the next stage of your career…when you become a president." And when the time did come, that man nominated Vega for what would be his first presidency.

**Challenges, Obstacles and Complications.** While President Vega had the support of a wide range of mentors and supporters, his pathway to the presidency was not without obstacles. It was always difficult to balance everything because he and his wife had limited financial means, had long commutes, and put in long work hours. Additionally, as the first college graduate, at times he had difficulty in relating his challenges to his family. Vega remembers one instance when his father walked in while he was working on his dissertation on a Saturday. His father asked him what he was doing. Vega explained that he was working. "He looked me up and down…and he said 'well, if you're sitting down, that's not work'." So, Vega shut his computer and went to help his father. As he saw it, "there are things like that, that aren't intended to be malicious, but in aggregate, they present themselves as something to get over."

President Vega had racialized experiences in college, something that he believes are "things about being people of color that [are] unique to us." For example, he once had a professor who came up to him and a friend and asked them where he could buy a zoot suit. Vega remembers thinking, "Number one, it's not 1949. Number two, what makes you think I know where it's at?" At that moment, beyond his pure bewilderment, he did not take too much offense to the question, but with further reflection he understood that the professor asked them because they were Mexican.

**Professional Development.** President Vega took advantage of many professional development opportunities that prepared him for executive-level academic leadership positions. Namely, he participated in the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) leadership program, University of California, Berkeley's Executive Leadership Academy, the Spectrum Leadership Programs, Harvard University's Institute for Management and Leadership in Education and their Management Development Program. One of Vega's most impactful professional development experiences occurred when he was given a "pretend crisis" and was filmed and questioned by a faux reporter. The video was then analyzed and deconstructed by his classmates, pointing out every issue from an aversion of the eyes to a brief stutter. "When you looked away from the camera, when you averted your eyes…it looked like you were guilty," he recalled. He had never been a part of something like that, but he found it to be "immensely helpful" once he experienced real predicaments later. Because he so aggressively pursued professional development opportunities, when Vega later faced obstacles, he "had the training and the preparation to overcome them."

**Prior Professional Roles.** Before seeking the presidency President Vega worked as an Assistant Professor, but eventually moved into administrative roles. He spent over 10 years at a university in the South building his resume in educational leadership; first as a Special Assistant to the President followed by Associate Vice Provost, Senior Vice President, and eventually Vice Provost (of both Student Affairs and Undergraduate Education). During this time, he was involved in several presidential searches, reaching the finalist stage four or five times before being selected for a presidency. Prior to his current role Vega was the President of another university in the South for over 3 years. "One thing about these jobs," he stated, "I don't believe that everything is disclosed during the interview process," suggesting that there were some institutional issues at his previous university that he was not made aware of until he arrived in the position. When he got to his new institution for his first presidency he was in a unique circumstance. For the first six months on the job, his family was still living in the community of his previous institution because his daughter was finishing high school. While "psychologically difficult" for Vega, he believed it allowed him to "throw himself completely into the job." Indeed, that first institution he presided over was facing several challenges, including "resource management…a long vacant Provost position, reputational challenges…some facility challenges, and questions about its role within the system it was in." Vega felt like an especially good fit for that school because of his background and experience with improving outcomes around student success and community engagement. Further, this institution aligned with his values. It reflected the diversity of the country and enrolled a student body that had high rates of minority, first-generation, low-income, transfer and Pell grant students. It was the type of university that he wanted to be a part of. But then COVID hit and Vega, like many others, reflected deeply on his life priorities and

decided to jump at the opportunity to return to his home state. He and his wife had five college degrees from California between them, so their roots run deep. It also allowed them to be closer to their elderly parents after having been away for nearly 20 years. The campus Vega would be leading, Sunstone University, enrolled 60% Latino students, 70% Pell Grant students, and 83% that identified as students of color. In a sense, he was coming home. The school was less than an hour's drive from where his father had first come to this country and picked grapes. As Vega puts it, it was the story of "a man and a brother who worked in the fields, and their son is the President of the only research university in that region." Ultimately, it was not an opportunity that he could pass up in good conscience. He reflected, "that's why we came back."

### *Familiarization with a New Institution*

**Initial Familiarization.** President Vega arrived at Sunstone University at what he describes as the "absolute worst period of the pandemic." When he got there, deaths were rising, with neither a vaccination nor explanation in sight. So, while he didn't reap the benefits of a typical executive onboarding, he felt a substantive alignment with the institution that he was leading. "People seemed to resonate with the fact that, here in this part of California," Vega said, "there was some aspect of my background that was very similar to their background." In truth he had family living near and around the region of his new campus, his father had worked in the fields, so it stood to reason that Vega was not only someone from California, and someone whose family knew the area, but also that he was someone who "would feel [Sunstone University] is home and would be [there] for a period of time." And the lack of in-person contact during this period was not necessarily without upside because he was able to learn about the campus in "an undistracted way." In the absence of receptions, lunches

and other events that would normally dominate his schedule, he was able to study the finances, personnel, vacancies, fund balances, etc. “I could look at division structure, school structure, [and] unit structure.” Ultimately, it gave him six to eight more months to study the campus than he would have had if the circumstances were more typical.

**Allies and Detractors.** President Vega draws support from his fellow President’s in the system, often reaching out to them for advice and guidance. He also has a deep respect for the system leader, a man of color, who he described as a person “of singular intellect, of depth, insight and ability.” But undoubtedly, Vega makes clear that “there are tough days in [the] job that make you angry…but more than that, they break your heart.” The aforementioned system leader has been effective in helping him heal a little bit from some of those moments or periods. But, while Vega could not identify any individual detractors, he underscored that personal attacks are commonplace in the presidency, especially as a leader of color. His predecessor was White, and some of the problems Vega navigates were around long before he arrived, so at times he finds himself questioning whether there is a difference in the level of scrutiny and criticism that he endures. “I don’t know if they were more patient and tolerant with previous leadership than they are with me, or maybe they expect more from me,” he stated, “but I do know that many colleagues that I have, that are people of color, face really uncalled for, exaggerated personal attacks.” Vega has navigated these racialized experiences by reminding himself that people do not necessarily hate him as a person, they hate the title. “They just know that they’re angry at the President, or the Chancellor, or the Provost or the Dean,” he claimed, “but they don’t know you…that helps a little bit, but we’re still people.”

**Campus Culture.** President Vega describes Sunstone University as a young campus "still developing many of the policies and procedures that a more mature campus requires to operate." Structurally, the campus is still determining its identity because of how young the campus is. President Vega points out the world-class faculty that make up the institution and describes how many of these faculty come from old and storied colleges and universities and bring those "mature" expectations with them to Sunstone University. Administratively and academically, the culture of the campus is "pulling into the future" with ambitions of national relevance, intertwined with the more conservative culture of the local community that the campus was built upon. As Vega describes, the campus draws from both halves by honoring "what was built and moving the best parts of it into the future." In terms of students, many of them had options to attend other schools in the system, many are Pell Grant recipients, many are Latinos or minorities more broadly, and nearly 90% of them are from California. However, even though the students "come from modest circumstances," they have tremendous aspirations for personal and professional success. Sunstone University is a campus that continues to evolve and aims to be "rightfully recognized among the best research universities in the country." Due to their determination to persevere and high-achieving abilities, Vega believes the campus will get there quicker than any other university in American history–and they will do so without sacrificing their commitment to the core values of diversity, equity, and inclusion.

### *Critical Incident #1: The Controversial Speaker*

A progressive scholar of color with a politically controversial background was invited to speak at Sunstone University. The person was relatively notorious during the 1960's civil rights movement, specifically regarding Black community empowerment.

President Vega likened the speaker's impact to what Cesar Chavez meant to the Latino community. However, Vega noted that "there were deep concerns about what the person would represent and whether it was consistent with the values of the campus and community." This is even though the controversy surrounding this speaker had taken place nearly half a century ago. Vega remembers several people speaking to him directly about "the errors of [his] judgment, even though he was not the person responsible for inviting the speaker." So even though it may have been someone in his office, or one of the offices that reports to him, who had invited the speaker, he was the one getting pressured. Vega describes those phone calls as "quite uncomfortable". Conversely, not long before this incident a controversial and politically right-wing speaker, Milo Yiannopoulos, had come to campus in response to an invitation from a student group and it did not receive the same level of scrutiny. "What he said about different communities–it was shocking," Vega said, "I don't know if the person that brought [Milo] received the same kind of phone calls."

The speaker's opponents argued with President Vega that if there was enough "money to provide a modest honorarium for that person, then [Sunstone University] has too much money." Basically, they argued that university resources should not be spent on a speaker of this type. When asked who the individuals were that pressured him, Vega only says it was the people who "were in a position to phone [him]...just leave it at that." The calls left him feeling uncomfortable. However, the scheduled event still took place, and the speaker did not touch on any of the controversial incidents. The speaker "talked about…criminal justice reform and…the economically negative impact of not investing more in the prevention of recidivism," which Vega argues most people would agree are

reasonable topics. The balanced, intelligent, academic presentation of the speaker was well-received.

However, to President Vega, this was a matter that got to "the soul of the campus." He believes that a university should be a "space for ideas, competing ideas, sometimes unpleasant ideas, but a place where people can only debate, challenge, be changed by those ideas, or reinforce their own ideas." Vega calls back to times when theories of eugenics were discussed on college campuses, but points to the "magnificence of the academic community" because, theoretically, "science and data and facts and truth prevail." This is why he believed this controversial speaker, and anybody else, should be brought to Sunstone University. Vega understands the pressure to tread carefully when navigating controversial situations. However, he underscored the importance of not "completely surrendering [the] intellectual, or ethnic or cultural soul" to survive. "If…you keep making decisions that are inconsistent with your core values," recalled Vega, "eventually you're eroded to the point where you're unrecognizable to yourself."

But in this instance, President Vega let matters play out and did not cancel the speaker. He survived the incident and went on to invite many more speakers: some that went well, and others that did not. He points to a post-social media era where, what might have been more manageable 15-20 years ago, would now be something that could lead to "10,000 emails from strangers." As Vega sees it, "anyone can distort a fairly benign straightforward decision in a way that could put you in a negative light…these decisions are just fraught with interpretation."

***Critical Incident #2: Hurricane on Campus***

This incident occurred at the first institution that President Vega presided over, West Gulf University, which is also an HSI. In this incident, the campus was struck by a massive hurricane. When Vega first stepped on to campus after the storm he was "walking into the water of [his] building…about three feet deep…and it came to just about waistline." The damage was incomprehensible–buses underwater, the city was underwater, and homes were underwater with no end in sight. Vega' first instinct was to communicate only when there were major developments, such as a full opening. But a woman who worked with him said "we need to communicate every day." She underscored the importance of being transparent about what the administration knew, even if it was only a minor update. Her reasoning was that it would "remove one unknown in what is an otherwise completely devastating experience." So, Vega and the campus began to send out messages every day at 3:30pm. "Sometimes it was…we've hired a contractor to begin to extract water," he recalls, "we've hired a firm that is going to administer moldicide in the building."

West Gulf University resumed instruction in about a week which, as President Vega describes, "was almost impossible to imagine at the worst of it." And after their work to get the campus functioning again, Vega kept hearing "how much of a relief and how encouraging the daily messages were from the campus." Essentially, in this incident, you could not over-communicate. Nevertheless, the campus endured millions of dollars of damage. West Gulf is next to a bayou, and the dirty water from those areas had soaked the campus community and was also creating lingering respiratory problems and other health issues for people. Further, they were not the only campus affected by the storms and the legislature provided "substantial funding to remediate a lot of that damage." Vega fielded many compliments after this incident, specifically as it pertained to his style where he took

“charge and [kept] charging forward” which allowed the campus to not only move so quickly but also “emerge from that horrible crisis, as well as [they] did.”

***Summary and Analysis***

Born to Mexican immigrants, President Vega overcame socioeconomic barriers to become the first in his family to graduate from college, funding his education through military service and other means. His college education was paved by a recognition of its role in social mobility and a politicized understanding of what his presence meant in elite educational spaces. Vega's career began with teaching high school, where he saw the potential to make an impact through higher education, especially in training teachers to work with disadvantaged and marginalized populations. In his doctoral journey, he experienced critical mentorship and support from peers and faculty, many who shared his background and faced similar challenges. These experiences, along with professional development opportunities and roles in academic administration, prepared him for the university presidency. As President of Sunstone University, Vega has focused on enhancing the university's commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion. Despite challenges, including racialized experiences, heightened scrutiny, and personal attacks, Vega's leadership aims to improve the institution and leverages his personal background to connect with and inspire the campus community that he, in many ways, reflects.

In the critical incident involving the invitation of a controversial speaker at Sunstone University, President Vega primarily utilized the political and symbolic dimensions of organizational behavior. Faced with pressure from various stakeholders who questioned the appropriateness of the speaker's invitation due to their politically controversial background, Vega stood firm on the principle that a university should be a space for diverse ideas,

including those that may be challenging or unpleasant. He leveraged the political dimension of organizational behavior by navigating competing interests and pressures within and outside the university community. Vega's handling of the situation also demonstrates the symbolic dimension of organizational behavior. By allowing the event to proceed and focusing on the academic and constructive nature of the speaker's presentation, he symbolized the university's dedication to being a forum for open dialogue, reflecting its deeper values and mission. Vega's approach here reinforced campus values in the face of pressure and opposition.

During the critical incident of a hurricane striking West Gulf University, President Vega demonstrated primary use of the bureaucratic and collegial dimensions of organizational behavior, but also utilized the political dimension to steer through the crisis effectively. His response highlighted the bureaucratic aspects of organizational behavior through systematic communication and operational strategies. His initial instinct was for sparse, major-update communication, but he pivoted to daily updates at a set time. This approach ensured structured, consistent communication of information, which was critical in maintaining order and transparency during the chaos. The collegial dimension was evident in Vega's collaborative approach to decision-making and problem-solving. The suggestion from a colleague to communicate daily was incorporated, showing an openness to feedback and shared governance. The collective effort to resume instruction within a week also indicates a collegial spirit, with staff, faculty, and administration working together towards a common goal of reopening. Politically, Vega also navigated the external relationships with the legislature to secure funding for damages, demonstrating an understanding of the political landscape and the importance of advocating for institutional resources. Vega’s

leadership during the hurricane at West Gulf University exemplifies how combining bureaucratic organization, collegial collaboration, and political savvy can guide an institution through a crisis.

President Vega's handling of challenging situations at Sunstone University and West Gulf University offers a multifaceted approach to organizational behavior. Through the controversy of the politically sensitive speaker and the crisis management of a hurricane, Vega showed how to maintain open dialogue, foster collaboration, and engage with political processes to secure resources. His leadership, rooted in personal experience and a commitment to inclusive values, points to the power of responsiveness and principles in working through institutional challenges and defending the campus community's values.

### Case 12: President Scott Winter, Golden Grove University

"Trust your instincts. and always seek principles." (Winter, 2023)

#### *Pathway to Presidency*

**Family Background and Education.** President Winter grew up in the Midwest near one of the Great Lakes. His mother attended a 25-student high school where she graduated as valedictorian. His father dropped out of school in the sixth grade, though he did return later and finished night school a year before Winter's older sister graduated. As he describes it, the Winter family did not have a lot of education in the family, but "there was a commitment to education that has been important to [him] and [his] brothers and sisters throughout." Winter attended prestigious R1 public schools for both his undergraduate and graduate educational experiences.

**Mentors.** There were a couple of key people who helped President Winter along the way. In his first faculty position as an Assistant Professor there were two others hired at the same time. One of them was a woman who was 10 years older than him and as Assistant Professors, she "wasn't so much a mentor as a colleague that [he] learned a lot from." Later, there was a senior faculty member in Winter's department who ran a research institute on campus. He admired and learned a lot through observing this individual. Winter also references a Provost during his time as Dean that he describes as a "great man" who eventually recommended him for a high-profile position.

**Challenges, Obstacles and Complications.** One of the first university systems that President Winter worked for resided in a state with a unique higher education structure. The "state university Presidents and Chancellors reported directly to the Board" rather than a system leader. The system President and Academic Affairs Vice President left their positions at the same time, which created vacancies that the state was looking to fill. While a Dean from another campus had been selected to take on the Acting President role while a search for the permanent position took place, the aforementioned Provost, who Winter worked for at the time, nominated him to be the Academic Vice President. The idea here was that Winter would serve for a full year, which would allow for the President's search to run its course as well as the search for his own replacement as the system Academic Vice President. However, during this year there were tensions between the state legislature and the governing board of the system that ended with the legislature threatening the dissolution of the Board. Because the issue dragged on, the year passed, and the Acting President left for another position. "So, the Board talked me into being Acting President," Winter recalled, "from Department Chair to President." This was a job he did not necessarily want to do, but

after he "got taken out to lunch twice by the Chairman of the Board," he agreed to do it. Eventually the state legislature and Board agreed to re-organization, which resulted in the statutory unseating and reseating of all 9 members of the Board, and the termination of the system CEO (Winter). "So, I got fired by a state legislature on Friday," he recollects, "and Saturday morning the board met by phone and reappointed him as President," a role he was in for the next three years in. Winter said, "I didn't enjoy the job, but I learned more in those three years than probably any other years…in my career."

In this role as system President, President Winter describes a time when he was meeting with a small group of high-profile people who had titles such as the state's Secretary of Labor. During the meeting somebody came into the room and handed him a note that said, "the Governor would like a call with you." He briefly underestimated the urgency of the request, but after judging the reactions of the others in the meeting, most of whom reported to the Governor, he recognized the urgency of the request and called him. Unfortunately for Winter, the Governor wanted to "chew him out." He recalls getting chewed out a few times, but as he says, "the first time that happens, it's always hard." Later on in his career Winter returned to his alma mater to take on a senior administrative role. The eight years he was there were positive and productive, but he and the President eventually parted ways on several issues.

**Prior Professional Roles.** President Winter took on his first faculty role at a major public university. He was seeking a "quiet little place" where he could work with his students. The school itself was large but his academic department was small. However, it proved to be too small so Winter made the move to another major public university for an Assistant Professor role in one of the largest programs in the country. He thrived at this institution and

eventually got promoted to Associate Professor. Two months later, the department chair position opened. Nobody in his department wanted the job and Winter was the compromise candidate. There was no clear option for an interim chair, and he became the compromise choice. At first, he did not think he would enjoy the job and only agreed to serve for a year. But he really enjoyed the position, was "pretty good at it," and decided to stay on. He came to appreciate the expanded impact he could have on people in that job. Winter asserted, "as faculty member I could help my students in my lab, but as a department chair I could help everybody in [the] department," He found that to be rewarding. This was a key juncture in Winter's professional career because prior to this position he was a faculty member with "no intention of ever being an administrator or President."

After several years in the department chair position, he applied for an Associate Dean job at the same institution at the college level, which made up two thirds of the university. While he did not get the position, the Dean at the time nominated him for the American Council on Education (ACE) Fellowship at another major public university. During the ACE Fellowship he acquired key skills in strategic planning and when he came back to his home institution, the Chancellor tasked him to help with the strategic plan. As discussed above, a flurry of circumstance and serendipity led to him jumping from department chair to President of the state higher education system. "I didn't necessarily like working in a system office," in part because "it was disconnected from the students [and] the faculty." So he jumped at the opportunity to return to the institution where he had been department chair, but this time he secured the Dean job of the Arts and Sciences College. After a few years as Dean, President Winter took a job at a public R1 research university as the Provost. He explained, "once you get to be Dean you kind of think…'I can be a

Provost'. And once you get to be Provost, you think 'I could be a President or Chancellor.'" He served in that Provost role for 8 years before moving to California and taking over the President job at Golden Grove University. Winter applied to several open President and Chancellor positions but did not get them. But Golden Grove University, as his wife says, "was meant to be." Winter had spent his career working on equity issues, and his new campus was an especially good fit for him.

### *Familiarization with a New Institution*

**Initial Familiarization.** When President Winter first arrived at Golden Grove University, he did not know alot about the university. "I knew about [California universities], like most of America," he explained, "because everybody knows about Berkeley, UCLA…but to most of the rest of the country, the rest [of the California universities] are kind of a blur." But Winter appreciated that Golden Grove University was diverse and had a chip on its shoulder about the way they were perceived in the same way his previous institution had, so he was familiar with some of the "institutional cultural comparisons." He describes the campus as highly diverse, working-class, and humble, so he did not have a difficult time familiarizing himself with the campus. Because he does not speak Spanish, that was one gap he had to navigate. Winter did "the usual kind of campus tour early on" and met with campus constituents which he believes "seemed to be sufficient" to get the lay of the land. As far as familiarization went, he quickly came to know the campus in some respects, but also makes clear that you can never fully know it. For example, he "couldn't name all the majors on the campus" and "couldn't tell you the names of half the faculty on campus." But since the pandemic Winter has felt at home and that campus constituents want him to be there.

**Campus Culture.** Golden Grove University is going to be a "hero nationally," according to President Winter, because they rank highly in social mobility ("number 1") and the school is one of the best research centers in the country. It took him about two or three months to get that read on the institution. Golden Grove University is a school that has undergone a recent transformation. When Winter first arrived it was a "campus that had great talent" but, despite enrolling 24,000 students, the campus operated as though it was serving less than 7,000. "They just hadn't changed," he recalled. While Golden Grove University had grown in size, it still used the same processes, philosophy, and staff. Winter said, "it was clear that there was work to do administratively." He also noticed there seemed to be a lack of pride, wherein very few students would wear Golden Grove University apparel around campus. The school was seen as a place where, if you could not get into one of the other prestigious universities in California, then you would attend Golden Grove University. Over the course of Winter's tenure, "that has changed a bunch." He feels campus constituents have considerable pride in the institution. "That's one key piece of the culture that I think we've made great progress on," Winter argued.

### *Critical Incident #1: New Provost Under Fire*

Early on in President Winter's time at Golden Grove University he hired a new Provost who was "the only recommended candidate from the search committee." The Provost made changes at a quicker pace than the rest of campus was prepared for. Within two years he would leave the university because of tensions with faculty. While Winter agreed the Provost was probably moving too quickly, the two were working in alignment together and he did not believe the Provosts actions were egregious enough to be so disliked by faculty. Winter went to the Faculty Senate before they planned to issue a vote of no

confidence and told them, “Look, there’s nothing he’s done here that I haven’t endorsed, if you’re going to throw somebody out, throw me out.” But unfortunately, they planned to move ahead with the vote anyway. The Provost eventually stepped down before the vote happened, but it was reportedly “neck and neck”. The whole ordeal weighed heavily on the Provost. Winter argued with an outspoken group of faculty that a vote of no confidence would not look good for the campus: “[it] just doesn’t reflect well.”

Ironically, all of the moves the Provost made that got him into trouble with those faculty were actions and changes that needed to be made, in part because the university had been updated little in the previous 40 years. Notably, one of the Provost’s initiatives was the addition of over 200 faculty members, but there were concerns about how that expansion was undertaken. “I believe that what he proposed was all good for the campus, and we actually achieved most of it, in time,” Winter said. During this ordeal he leaned on both his Associate President, who operated as a sort of Chief of Staff at Golden Grove University, and the Campus Counsel as key advisors. Once the Provost stepped down, the conversation shifted to determining how they could keep moving forward with the work that had been started. The work did indeed continue, and Golden Grove University has made considerable progress regarding student success, and Winter credits the Provost with beginning that process. As he reflects back on the incident it convinced him that, for some (in this instance, the group of outspoken faculty), “getting their way was more important than anything else,” even the reputation and well-being of the institution. This revelation fortified Winter’s determination to continue pushing his agenda: “In some ways, they just emboldened me to be more certain about moving [forward].”

***Critical Incident #2: COVID***

One Friday in the middle of March 2020, President Winter received a call from the county health office notifying him that Golden Grove University would not be in session the following Monday. This left him and the rest of the school only a weekend to prepare for shutting everything down. Since Golden Grove University was located in one of the earliest counties to close in the state, they were a bit ahead of other colleges and universities in California, but it was still an overwhelming time. Winter is a firm believer in relying on existing systems. “When you have challenges, don’t try to build a new system,” he described, “it’s too disruptive and it’s too time sensitive.” He further argued that if you have a current system that has been tested, even if it may not be ideal, at least it is familiar. Winter said this reliance on existing systems worked well in some ways but did create challenges in other circumstances. For example, at the beginning of the pandemic when there was a real threat of critical budget cuts, a Budget Advisory Committee made controversial recommendations, including the suggestion that the entire athletic department should be closed. Luckily, later in the pandemic significant governmental bailout packages were dispersed which allowed Golden Grove University to avoid severe budget cuts. It was important to Winter and the campus to keep staff employed, and they did. He describes that period as a “series of organizational pieces” where many meetings took place with all the Vice Presidents and other key campus constituents. This operation was led through a COVID committee. “We eventually got there, but we didn’t get there right away,” Winter discussed, “again, things were up in the air, so it’s hard to be too critical of us.” The COVID focused team was not a standing committee and took some time to form. It included “the usual cast of characters”: Vice Presidents, Provost, Finance and Operations leaders, and the Chief of Staff.

In the first year of the COVID pandemic, many faculty members were frustrated with the restrictions on access to their labs or research space. That proved to be a significant challenge for President Winter but that eventually calmed down. However, in many ways Golden Grove University is still dealing with a common trend in higher education where engagement levels have not returned to pre-pandemic levels. Winter has delegated post-pandemic work accommodations to his units. “I don’t want to pretend to know who has to be at work, what days, and what times,” he argued, “the strategy has merit because it puts the decision-making at the locus of knowledge.” But Winter is the first to note that there are inequities between the employees who can and cannot work from home, another issue facing many American higher education institutions. Looking back now he is especially proud of how the campus dealt with the budget. Golden Grove University does not run a structural deficit and the leadership attempts to “honor [their] responsibility to avoid that kind of budgetary challenge.” Surprisingly, Winter is not sure if he learned anything new during this process. He believes a campus continues to function because the entire organization of employees do their jobs, as they did during the pandemic. “COVID was a set of jobs many of us hadn’t done before,” he explained, “but…everybody did their job, and so that was the key lesson.” He learned early on in his Provost role out in the Midwest, if you trust people to do their jobs then things will generally work out.

### *Critical Incident #3: Vice President of Sexual Harassment*

After several years on the job, President Winter learned that the Vice President for Student Affairs had been sexually harassing staff members for many years. He memorably had to call four of his predecessors to notify them that this harassment had also taken place under their watch. It was a challenge for Winter to deal with the individual, as well as the

"emotions of the campus." While Winter consulted a bit with system leadership, Golden Grove University mostly handled the situation in-house in collaboration with legal advisors and Title IX professionals, who were all aligned on the response. The VPSA hired to replace the harasser ended up being high quality. In just two years the Golden Grove University Student Affairs Office was ranked as one of the 50 best places to work in student affairs in the country. The new VPSA was a "master of healing the division" as Winter describes it, they "actually got over it much faster than I ever would have predicted." After the dust settled, Winter engaged in a fact review of processes and procedures to better understand who had been informed, when they were informed, and who should have been informed. He concluded, "all those things are necessary, if you're serious about trying to do better in the future."

### *Summary and Analysis*

President Winter emerged from modest beginnings, with a family upbringing that valued learning despite limited formal education. With a background in the field of speech science, Winter transitioned from faculty to administrative roles, learning crucial leadership lessons from mentors, unexpected professional challenges, and key roles that established his perspective on higher education leadership. His prior experiences include being thrust into a system presidency role amidst political turmoil and managing complex relationships within state-level academic hierarchies. At Golden Grove University, Winter leveraged those experiences to support the development of the university's identity and culture, focusing on administrative rebuilding, boosting campus pride, and positioning the institution as a leader in social mobility. His tenure at Golden Grove University consists of a campus transformation that aligns with his lifelong commitment to education and equity.

In the critical incident involving the new Provost at Golden Grove University, President Winter primarily engaged the bureaucratic, collegial, and systemic dimensions of organizational behavior, but also utilized the political dimension as well. The Provost's rapid pace of change led to tensions with faculty, ending in a potential vote of no confidence. Winter's bureaucratic approach is clear in his support for the Provost's initiatives, which were aimed at institutional improvement despite the faculty resistance. To Winter, a commitment to formal processes and structural changes were necessary for the university's advancement. Winter's collegial engagement with the Faculty Senate, appealing directly to them and taking responsibility for the Provost's actions, shows a respect for shared governance and the importance of faculty relations in university administration. His willingness to face consequences alongside the Provost also shows loyalty to his team members. The systemic dimension of Winter's approach is reflected in his understanding of the university as an evolving entity that required updates to its operations and policies. He recognized the need for change to foster student success and institutional growth with a focus on the long-term well-being of the university. Politically, Winter attempted to negotiate through a contentious atmosphere by arguing against the vote of no confidence by explaining the negative consequences it would have for the university's reputation. His engagement with key advisors and the strategic maneuvering to continue the Provost's work after his departure reveal a reflective understanding of the political landscape within the university, balancing between advancing necessary changes while managing faculty relations. The incident ultimately reinforced Winter's determination to pursue his vision for Golden Grove University, despite opposition.

At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, President Winter faced the unprecedented challenge of transitioning Golden Grove University to remote operations with minimal preparation time. Utilizing the systemic dimension of organizational behavior, Winter leaned on established systems and processes to manage the crisis, holding to the principle that familiar frameworks, even if not perfect, provide a stable foundation during turbulent times. This approach facilitated the university's ability to adapt quickly, despite initial hurdles, particularly in handling potential budget cuts and maintaining employment for staff members. In addressing these budgetary concerns, Winter relied on existing bureaucratic structures, like the Budget Advisory Committee, even though at times it produced contentious recommendations, such as the proposal to close the athletic department. The eventual government aid received also showed the political dimension at play, where the strategic procurement of external support helped avert severe financial distress. Winter later took a collegial approach in opening dialogues with faculty over their frustrations regarding work accommodations, reflecting a belief in shared governance and human compassion. He tried to balance operational needs with the realities of remote work, but acknowledged the inequities it introduced among university staff who could or could not work remotely. Reflecting on the pandemic, Winter appreciates the collective effort of the Golden Grove University community in maintaining the university's operations and their capacity to adapt and fulfill their roles, even under extraordinary circumstances.

In the incident concerning the Vice President for Student Affairs (VPSA) at Golden Grove University, President Winter took decisive measures, consisting of an application of bureaucratic, collegial, systemic, and, to a lesser extent, political dimensions of organizational behavior. Upon discovering the longstanding issue of sexual harassment,

Winter showed a bureaucratic commitment to institutional protocols and rules. The collegial aspect of Winter's response focused on healing within the Student Affairs division, particularly through the appointment of a successor that fostered significant positive change, reflected a deep understanding of the need for healing among the campus community. Winter's systemic approach was shown through the comprehensive review of the university's procedural responses. Politically, Winter managed the university's reputation by acknowledging past mistakes and outlining a forward-looking strategy, balancing external perceptions and internal dynamics. The steps taken in the aftermath to audit and improve upon the university's processes and procedures offer a forward-thinking approach to organizational leadership. By addressing the incident head-on and implementing measures aimed at preventing future occurrences, Winter contributed to creating a safe, respectful, and equitable campus environment.

President Winter's approach to a provost's controversial reforms, the COVID-19 pandemic, and a sexual harassment scandal reveals a layered strategy combining bureaucratic, collegial, systemic, and political dimensions. By supporting necessary institutional changes, even when faced with faculty resistance, Winter showed the importance of structured processes and a commitment to shared governance. His response to the pandemic highlighted the efficacy of relying on established systems for rapid adaptation, balancing the immediate needs of the university community with its long-term institutional health. The decisive action taken in the face of the VPSA situation points to a prioritization of systemic and procedural integrity, as well as the political acumen needed to work through sensitive situations. Across these incidents, Winter's leadership reflects a dedication to

advancing Golden Grove University's mission while working towards a culture of respect and accountability.

**Across-Case Results**

This section covers the results and key takeaways of the across-case critical incident analysis. The first part focuses on an overview of the primary and secondary dimensions of organizational behavior used across the 37 reported critical incidents. The parts following examine the results of the critical incidents by institutional type, by source (internal or external), and by years as president. The section concludes with a summary of the perspectives shared by the presidents of the relevance of the HSI status to the discussed critical incidents. See Table 3 below to see the primary and secondary utilization of dimensions of organizational behavior by critical incident. Primary utilization refers to the central strategies or behaviors that these leaders deployed to address and resolve the discussed critical incidents or challenges. These are the main actions taken that reflect the leaders' foundational responses to the situations. Secondary utilization consists of supportive strategies or behaviors that complemented the primary actions. These were not the main tools used to tackle these issues but still played a role at some point during the handling of the incident. Please see Appendix E for a more in-depth review of what is discussed in this across-case results section.

**Table 3**

*Primary and Secondary Dimensions of Organizational Behavior Utilized by Critical Incident*

| President and Incident | Collegial | Bureaucratic | Political | Systemic | Symbolic |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Dr. James Smith | | | | | |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| The Campus Flood | P | S | | P | |
| The Controversial Hire | | S | P | | |
| The Faculty Sexual Harasser | P | P | | S | |
| Dr. Carmen Reyes | | | | | |
| The Satellite Campus | P | P | | | S |
| The Military Charter School | | | P | | P |
| The Organizational Restructure | P | P | | S | |
| Dr. Mellie Kimperton | | | | | |
| COVID | P | P | | P | S |
| The Accreditation Plan | P | P | P | S | |
| The Body in the Lake | P | P | | P | S |
| Dr. Luis Mendoza | | | | | |
| COVID | S | P | P | P | P |
| From Center to College | S | P | P | | |
| The Bare Cabinet | P | S | P | | |
| Dr. Ryan Easton | | | | | |
| Las Politicas | S | P | P | | |
| The Promise Program | P | P | S | S | S |
| The Rogue Trustee | S | | P | S | |
| Dr. Nico Tolentino | | | | | |
| Israel-Palestine Conflict | P | | P | | S |
| The Neighbor's Gun | P | | | P | |
| HSI Funding Fumble | | S | P | P | |
| Dr. Clara Pennington | | | | | |
| Deal Made, Salary Cut | S | | P | | P |
| The Internal Hire | S | P | | | P |
| Israel-Palestine Conflict | P | | P | | |
| Tessa Norwood, JD | | | | | |
| The Coach's Post | P | P | | | |
| The Return to Normalcy | P | P | | S | |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| The Merger | P | P | P | P | S |
| Dr. Catherine Dale | | | | | |
| The Fire on Campus | P | P | | P | |
| COVID | P | P | | P | S |
| Private School Survival | | S | P | P | |
| Dr. Patrick Lawson | | | | | |
| From Insider to President | P | S | P | | |
| The Prioritization | P | P | | P | S |
| Spaces and Support | P | S | P | S | P |
| Profiled on Campus | P | S | | P | |
| COVID | P | P | | | |
| Dr. Antonio Vega | | | | | |
| The Controversial Speaker | | | P | | P |
| The Hurricane on Campus | P | P | S | | |
| The Provost Under Fire | | S | P | | |
| Dr. Scott Winter | | | | | |
| COVID | S | S | S | P | |
| The VC of Sexual Harassment | P | P | S | P | |
| Total (Primary) | 24 | 20 | 18 | 14 | 6 |
| Total (Secondary) | 7 | 10 | 4 | 7 | 8 |
| Full Total | 31 | 30 | 22 | 21 | 14 |

*Note*. "P" stands for "primary", meaning they were a primary dimension of organizational behavior utilized during that critical incident. "S" stands for secondary, meaning there was some level of usage of that dimension of organizational behavior in response to that critical incident.

### *Overview of Dimensions of Organizational Behavior Used in Critical Incidents*

The analysis of critical incidents discussed by twelve college and university presidents revealed a few key takeaways regarding their leadership approach. First, they

tend to use a multi-dimensional approach when addressing critical incidents. With presidents reporting that they tended to draw on an average of over three dimensions of organizational behavior utilized, the issues faced by college leaders are complex and necessitate the leveraging of multiple approaches and strategies to navigate these challenges effectively. Second, the collegial and bureaucratic dimensions were the most frequently employed, indicating a preference for collaborative (collegial) and structured, rule-based (bureaucratic) approaches in handling critical incidents. This suggests that these presidents sought to build consensus while also maintaining order through hierarchical authority and the pursuit of rational goals in higher education institutions. Third, the symbolic dimension was used the least, both primarily and secondarily. This could indicate that, in critical situations, tangible and concrete approaches are prioritized by college leaders over those that are more abstract or representational (e.g., leveraging symbols, rituals, or ceremonies). It may also suggest an area for further development since the symbolic aspect has the potential to shape organizational culture. Fourth, the variability in the primary and secondary utilization of different dimensions points to the adaptive and situational leadership of college presidents. These leaders seemed to assess each incident by the context of the situation, and then decided to employ a broad range of dimensions of organizational behaviors to resolve the incidents.

### *Analysis of Critical Incidents by Institutional Type*

The critical incident analysis across three institutional types—public 2-year colleges, public 4-year universities, and private 4-year universities—unveiled a few additional patterns in how college presidents approach and resolve critical incidents through dimensions of organizational behavior. First, the leaders of public 2-year colleges showed a

balanced use of the collegial, bureaucratic, and political dimensions, with a trailing presence of the systemic and symbolic dimensions. However, the rate of primary and secondary dimensional utilization for 2-year public universities was in line with the rates for all critical incidents. Second, presidents of public 4-year universities showed a strong emphasis on the political dimension, which is involved in every incident, as well as a significant use of the bureaucratic dimension, which may be attributable to the larger size of these schools. But, the smaller sample size (five incidents) limits broader conclusions, such as average differences in primary and secondary usage of dimensions of organizational behavior. Third, like 2-year public college presidents, leaders of private 4-year universities displayed a high reliance on the collegial dimension, followed closely by the bureaucratic. The political dimension is less emphasized in the critical incidents described by private university presidents compared to public institutions. These leaders of private universities also, on average, primarily utilized dimensions higher than the total rate and exhibited a lower secondary dimension than the total rate. So, while college presidents across different types of institutions adopt a multi-dimensional approach to managing critical incidents, there are some differences in the reliance on specific dimensions, but they are relatively minor.

### *Analysis of Critical Incidents by Source*

The analysis of critical incidents based on their source—internal or external—provides some fascinating distinctions in how college presidents deploy dimensions of organizational behavior. First, the systemic dimension showed higher involvement in externally sourced incidents, which possibly indicates the need for leaders to consider more comprehensive systemic responses when dealing with external pressures. Meanwhile, political dimension usage was somewhat more pronounced in internal incidents than in

external ones, which might suggest the importance of navigating internal power dynamics and stakeholder interests more intensively within the institution. Finally, externally sourced critical incidents required the usage of four or more dimensions of organizational behavior more frequently than internally sourced incidents. This may be because of the nature of externally sourced incidents, typically complex with implications for public image and the need for adaptability, often demanding a broader and more versatile utilization of dimensions of organizational behavior to navigate successfully. These findings suggest that college presidents may adapt their use of dimensions of organizational behavior based on the source of the critical incident, with a slight preference for certain dimensions depending on whether the incident originates within or outside the institution.

### *Analysis of Critical Incidents by Years as President*

Analyzing the utilization of dimensions of organizational behavior in addressing critical incidents based on the tenure of college presidents reveals several interesting patterns between veteran presidents and new presidents. First, veteran presidents deployed a slightly wider array of dimensions of organizational behavior on average compared to new presidents. Further, a higher proportion of incidents handled by veteran presidents required the use of four or more dimensions compared to those managed by new presidents. This suggests that with more experience, presidents may develop a larger toolkit of strategies for addressing critical incidents. Second, veteran presidents show higher secondary utilization of dimensions compared to new presidents, indicating that they might be more adept at applying a nuanced, layered approach to problem-solving in critical situations. Third, veteran presidents exhibited a higher usage of the bureaucratic and systemic dimensions, which may be attributed to their familiarity with institutional processes and systems, as well

as more confidence in the use of their formal authority. Lastly, new presidents showed a higher rate of reliance on the symbolic dimension than the veterans, perhaps reflecting a tendency to emphasize vision, culture, and values as tools for navigating crises early in their tenure. These key takeaways suggest that experience plays a role in shaping how college presidents respond to crises, with veteran presidents displaying a tendency to engage a broader and possibly more sophisticated set of dimensions of organizational behavior.

### *Presidential Perspectives on Relevance of HSI Status to Critical Incidents Discussed*

The relevance of HSI status to the critical incidents discussed by the college presidents in this study reflects varied perspectives on its impact on their decision-making and leadership. President Vega stated, "the challenges in this role, I think, are agnostic of the campus…in terms of its ethnic demographics," suggesting that the HSI status did not directly influence the handling of these critical incidents. President Winter shared a reflective stance, indicating that while the HSI status is integral to the institution's identity, its direct impact on specific decisions is complex and not easily traceable: "So maybe, I guess…but it's not a not a boom, boom, connect the dots kind of thing." President Kimperton emphasized the centrality of serving the student community, especially in contexts of equity and social justice: "It really didn't [factor in] to be honest…I think for these incidents that I said, they're not particularly related necessarily to…that specific population in itself." This points to a broader commitment to equity that goes beyond, though it is informed by, the institution's HSI designation. Meanwhile, President Smith highlighted the complexity of expectations and expressions associated with the HSI status: "So that definitely has something to do with our HSI. That role." He indicated that while the HSI designation influences institutional dynamics, it must be navigated with sensitivity and

awareness. President Dale pointed to the tangible benefits of the HSI status, such as supplementary funding and a focus on serving under-resourced communities: “I don't want to over generalize, but the correlation is pretty strong around where we are, because that's kind of the neighborhood's we interact with, and have a real commitment to.” The intersection of financial need and serving Latino communities highlights the practical implications of HSI status in addressing equity and access to education. President Tolentino considered the HSI status as part of a broader mission to address inequity, emphasizing systemic learning and improvement: “And so part of an HSI is…to address that inequity. And so, it's connected to some degree but…the only way that I can connect HSI is some of the system and processes that we have as an organization, that we're learning how to improve.” Finally, President Mendoza directly linked the HSI designation to personal motivation and institutional initiatives aimed at reflecting and serving the student body: “Because, you know, the main reason…that I'm here is because it is an HSI. And I wanted to be at a place where I represent and reflect the students that I serve.” These leaders’ insights reveal a spectrum of views on the relevance of HSI status—from seeing it as a background factor with limited direct impact on crisis management, to acknowledging its influence on institutional values, community engagement, and the pursuit of equity.

### *Summary*

This across-case section detailed the results of the critical incident analysis of 12 university presidents and 37 critical incidents. First, there was an overview of the combined results, including the average number of dimensions of organizational behavior utilized as well as the primary and secondary usage of those dimensions in working through each critical incident. The results were then analyzed based on three comparisons: (a) institutional

type, (b) critical incident source, and (c) years as president. The institutional type analysis examined 2-year public colleges, 4-year public universities, and 4-year private universities. The analysis of critical incident source examined the differences between critical incidents that were initiated externally with those that were initiated internally. Finally, the analysis by years in a presidential role looked at differences in organizational behavior between new presidents (less than five years) and veteran presidents (more than five years).

While the general overview and each sub-analysis yielded a range of results, I argue there are four overarching and instructive key takeaways from this critical incident analysis: (a) the ubiquity of multi-dimensional approaches, (b) the preference for collegial and bureaucratic dimensions, (c) the salience of adaptive and situational leadership, (d) the influence of context in the handling these incidents (see Table 4 below). Across all discussed critical incidents, presidents universally adopted a multi-dimensional strategy to address them, indicative of the complexity of the challenges they face. A multi-dimensional approach allows for a more composite and effective response to the diverse issues inherently facing leaders in higher education. Second, across the board, including each sub-analysis, there was a significant reliance on the collegial and bureaucratic dimensions. The consistent deployment of those two dimensions points to the importance of collaboration, compassion, and structured, rule-based procedures in crisis management within college environments. Further, the variability in the utilization of different dimensions highlights the adaptive nature of college presidents' leadership. These presidents assessed each incident individually and drew on a wide toolkit of organizational behaviors to formulate their responses, reflective of a flexible approach to leadership that is responsive to the unique circumstances of each incident. Though possibly a product of the institutions, leaders or incidents included

in this sample, there were only minor differences in the usage of specific dimensions of organizational behavior by institutional type. However, there was a moderate relationship between the source of the critical incident and the organizational behavior selected. During externally sourced incidents, leaders employed a more comprehensive utilization of dimensions, and a higher rate of usage of the systemic dimension in particular. This could be due to the complexity and public-facing nature of external incidents, which required a more multi-pronged, systemic response. Finally, experience in the job seemed to play a role in shaping leadership approaches to crises. Veteran presidents tended to use a wider array of dimensions of organizational behavior and demonstrated a layered approach to problem-solving, with extra emphasis on bureaucratic and systemic dimensions. This seems likely due to their additional time to familiarize themselves with the college presidency, leading to a deeper understanding of institutional dynamics and a wider collection of strategies. These four key takeaways reveal the dimensional balance college presidents choose to navigate the challenges of their roles effectively.

**Table 4**

*Four Key Takeaways of Critical Incident Analysis of College and University Presidents*

| Key Takeaways |
| --- |
| Ubiquity of Multi-Dimensional Approaches |
| Preference for Collegial and Bureaucratic Dimensions |
| Salience of Adaptive and Situational Leadership |
| Influence of Context in Incident Handling |

## Chapter 5

## Discussion, Implications and Conclusions

This chapter concludes the study with four subsections. First, there is a discussion of the significance of the findings. Due to the applied nature of the field of educational leadership, there is a focus on practical implications. Second, there is a review of the limitations of the study. The third section covers recommendations, and the last section consists of final thoughts and personal reflections.

## Discussion and Significance of the Findings

### *The Influence of Presidential Leadership on Institutional Outcomes*

This study suggests that presidential leadership in higher education influences institutional outcomes, particularly regarding student success and engagement. The leadership styles and strategic decisions of university presidents seems to not only shape campus environments but also affect student-focused outcomes such as retention rates, graduation rates, and overall student well-being. Effective management during crises, as demonstrated by President Dale during the wildfire and pandemic, ensured that students could continue their education with minimal interruption. Maintaining academic continuity during those sorts of critical incidents is crucial for student retention and success and, in that case, likely prevented potential dropouts and disengagement. Presidents like Lawson, who revitalized the Josue Menchaca Center for Hispanic Leadership, directly addressed the needs of underrepresented students, and contributed to an inclusive atmosphere that supports the success of all student groups. Such initiatives not only improve campus climate but also contribute to closing the achievement gap among historically marginalized student populations. Visionary leaders like Presidents Winter, Norwood and Kimperton, who implemented significant reforms in response to administrative challenges and external crises, saw improvements in institutional effectiveness that led to more robust academic

programs and improved administrative support for students, which influenced their academic experiences and future opportunities. Leaders who recognized and addressed the holistic needs of their students, such as President Vega during the COVID-19 pandemic, made sure that students had the necessary resources to succeed academically. This includes mental health support, financial aid, and academic advising, which are critical for student retention and success. This is all to say that the influence of presidential leadership on institutional outcomes, especially those centered on students, is profound. Leaders who adopt a student-centered approach, prioritize equity and inclusion, engage in visionary restructuring, and advocate for collaborative and supportive environments seem more likely to see positive outcomes in student success. The leaders in this study not only responded effectively to immediate institutional challenges but also set the stage for long-term achievements that have the potential to resonate through every aspect of student life and learning.

### *The Importance of Background in University Leadership*

Judging from the leaders of this study, the personal and professional backgrounds of university presidents plays a key role in shaping their leadership approaches, priorities, and values. The unique experiences, principles, and challenges that these leaders bring to their roles influence not only how they manage and respond to institutional needs but also how they connect with the university community. Leaders with diverse cultural backgrounds, like Presidents Vega, Smith, and Reyes, who experienced first-hand the challenges faced by marginalized communities, are often more attuned to the needs of those same communities. This sensitivity can lead to more thoughtful, inclusive policies and practices that increase equity on campus. Presidents who were first-generation college students, such as Presidents

Easton and Lawson, tend to have a deep understanding of the barriers to higher education. Their personal experiences can drive a strong commitment to improving access and support for students who may be struggling with similar challenges. Backgrounds that include overcoming personal or socio-economic challenges can contribute to an empathetic leadership style. For example, Presidents Tolentino and Pennington's empathetic approach likely stems from a personal appreciation of the struggles faced by first-generation American students, influencing their activist approach to supporting student welfare. University leaders who share similar backgrounds with a major portion of their student body or community can serve as powerful role models and advocates. President Mendoza, for instance, uses his background to connect with and inspire a diverse campus community, demonstrating that leadership can effectively mirror the demographic it serves. When leaders' backgrounds resonate with their community, it can build credibility and the trust placed in them. This connection can be key in establishing or maintaining a campus culture where students, faculty, and staff feel understood and valued. Ultimately, the background of university presidents is more than just a biography; it is a major component of their leadership identity. It influences their values, priorities, and the strategies they employ in leading their institutions. By understanding and appreciating the diverse backgrounds of university leaders, institutions can leverage these insights to support environments that are not only inclusive and equitable but also adaptive and forward-thinking.

### *Ubiquity of Multi-Dimensional Approaches*

The multidimensional approach employed by university presidents in navigating critical incidents reveals the complex nature of leading higher education institutions. This study has found that, on average, presidents engage with over three dimensions of

organizational behavior when addressing critical incidents, with every incident discussed in this study exhibiting the deployment of at least two dimensions. This multi-pronged approach makes clear the challenges that university presidents face often require a layered and comprehensive leadership strategy. Additionally, there seems to be a connection between the duration of a critical incident and the number of dimensions of organizational behavior required, where leaders are more likely to pull from a wider set of dimensions for extended critical incidents. For example, President Norwood utilized all five dimensions of organizational behavior in her multi-year pursuit of merging and acquiring outside higher education institutions. She determined and set the goals of pursuing these mergers, but she has also needed to rely heavily on consultation for the best way to approach them, which sometimes required tough decisions and negotiations around resource allocation and programmatic prioritization. Further, President Norwood had to consider such symbolic implications around issues like name changes for the acquired institutions and how they might affect her existing as well as new institutional members. And, finally, she had to carefully employ systems and processes for completing these mergers which sometimes required reviewing previous procedures and consulting with alumni who had professional experience in mergers and acquisitions. President Norwood's case exemplifies how leaders must navigate through complex trade-offs, engage in thorough consultation processes, and embody institutional values in a manner that reassures and guides the university community through a period of change.

Similarly, the COVID-19 pandemic presented a scenario where university leaders had to react to an unprecedented, ever-evolving and all-encompassing crisis. The initial decisive actions required, such as shutting down their physical campuses, morphed into a

longer-term strategy that incorporated a broad spectrum of organizational behaviors, including an understanding of the perspectives and needs of various campus constituencies. It also included the need for these presidents to engage in symbolic moves that exemplified their values and the values of their campuses, such as public vaccination or maintaining a physical presence on campus upon re-opening, alongside the practical implementation of new procedures to address the crisis and the new normal it created. The pandemic's wide-reaching impact called for bargaining, coalition-building, and the continuous adaptation of campus systems to meet the evolving needs of students, faculty, and staff. These examples reflect the unique operational landscape of higher education, where leaders are called upon to navigate issues that cannot be addressed through a unidimensional approach. The complexity and diversity of critical incidents in this setting demands a leadership style that is sensitive to the many dimensions of organizational behavior. This finding ultimately highlights the importance of a wide toolkit of organizational behavior to effectively manage the challenges experienced by university presidents.

### *Preference for Collegial and Bureaucratic Dimensions*

The exploration of university presidents' specific leadership behaviors, particularly their preference for collegial and bureaucratic dimensions when navigating critical incidents, offers a peek into the nature of higher education institutions. This study, revealing that in over 80% of the critical incidents discussed both collegial and bureaucratic dimensions were employed, suggesting these leadership approaches are most often needed within the context of the unique shared governance models and complex structures of the academic sector. Unlike traditional business environments, universities and colleges are characterized by shared governance models. These models mean that university presidents need to engage not

just in top-down decision-making but also in collaborative processes that involve a broad array of stakeholders including governance boards, faculty, students, staff, alumni, and other community members. While some critical incidents required decisive action and authoritative approaches, others called for intensive consultation. For example, the actions taken by Presidents Winter and Smith in response to sexual harassment incidents on campus highlight the capacity for firm decision-making within the bureaucratic dimension, reflected in the immediate termination of the harassers. Conversely, President Lawson's approach to engaging Latino students in dialogue reflects the collegial dimension's emphasis on consultation, shared decision-making, and constituent empowerment. These examples drive home the importance of adopting an approach that is responsive to the needs of the campus community.

This finding also speaks to the implications of the inherently human-centered nature of higher education, which contrasts sharply with the motives of for-profit organizations. The pandemic posed unprecedented challenges, including the need for university leadership to exhibit empathy, flexibility, and a heightened focus on the well-being of individuals within the academic community. Leadership during such times extended through administrative decision-making to emotional support, suggesting the human impacts of these crises on students, faculty, and staff alike. Communication also emerged as a pivotal theme in effective university leadership, serving as a key tool for maintaining transparency, building trust, and fostering a sense of community during these critical incidents. The emphasis on clear and consistent communication by President Kimperton when a body showed up in the campus lake, or Presidents Vega and Smith when a hurricane wrecked their campus, and others during significant campus incidents points to the role of

communication in not just conveying information but also in stabilizing the community's morale. Additionally, the political and systemic dimensions of organizational behavior, while not as predominant as the collegial and bureaucratic dimensions, play a crucial role in the strategic navigation of critical incidents. The political acumen of leaders like President Mendoza, who leveraged his experience in local government and worked with power brokers to accelerate the accreditation process, shows the importance of external networking and political strategizing in achieving institutional goals. Similarly, the systemic dimension of organizational behavior can be a valuable approach for university presidents because it allows them to address any shortcomings or blind spots that may have initiated the critical incidents they encounter. For example, President Tolentino inherited a situation where his staff missed submission deadlines for key federal funds. One of his responses to this issue was to establish a firm and thoughtful plan with clear procedures and designated professionals to ensure the deadlines around HSI funding are met going forward. Ultimately, the consistency of the utilization of the bureaucratic and collegial dimensions, coupled with the frequent use of political and systemic strategies, points to a leadership landscape littered with many types of issues and incidents. These findings offer valuable lessons for current and future university leaders to know which skills are most relevant to the role.

### *Salience of Adaptive and Situational Leadership*

The adaptive leadership shown by university presidents in confronting the critical incidents in this study points to a sophisticated understanding of leadership. These leaders, through personal experiences, institutional values, and situational demands, craft responses that are as varied as the incidents themselves. Their tailored approaches indicate that these presidents do not default to a monolithic style of leadership. The presidents each showed a

capacity to assess situations individually and deploy a wide-ranging toolkit of organizational behavior. For instance, President Reyes' leadership is deeply influenced by her personal background and her empathetic connection with her campus's demographic of largely low-income, first generation, Latino and non-traditional students. This personal resonance informs her leadership but does not limit her scope of action. She also demonstrated an adeptness in utilizing the political, bureaucratic, and systemic dimensions of organizational behavior. During her handling of "The Organizational Restructure" she was authoritative in the face of critics resistant to change, and confident in her determination to pursue a rational restructuring of the campus organization. And even though she was ultimately unsuccessful in bringing "The Military Charter School" onto her campus, she made important political calculations during that critical incident through her strategic vision and coalition-building with local parents. This nimbleness in leadership approach speaks to her ability to pivot across different dimensions of organizational behavior as the situation demands, rather than being confined by a singular leadership style.

The evolution of leadership capabilities through reflection and learning from past experiences is another key aspect of the adaptive leadership seen in this study. President Easton recalled serious challenges during his first presidency when he overlooked the importance of political maneuvering and awareness—and was essentially pushed out over the matter. Later, when confronted with critical incidents that, once again, required political organizational behavior, he was better equipped to handle the situation. This was evidenced by his successful leveraging of the college's governance board to support him in dealing with "The Rogue Trustee" by making clear he would pursue a new presidency if they did not heed his call. When President Vega's campus was flooded by a massive hurricane, he

thought back to his time in the military and leaned on an approach he learned then to tackle issues one at a time, which ultimately proved to be wise as he was able to delegate and incrementally get the school back to a physical state of readiness. This learning curve is part of the process through which leaders enhance their effectiveness by refining their approach to better navigate their roles.

The intersection between different dimensions of organizational behavior in a single leadership action also strengthens the finding of situational leadership. President Pennington's decision to cut her own salary during labor negotiations is a moving example of how a single act can be representative of both collegial and symbolic dimensions, reflective of the core values of her university as responsive to the needs of its people and of her role as a President that is the first among equals. Another example of this is when President Dale's campus was evacuated for several weeks due to a major local fire. With students displaced, she was forced to act quickly, and she chose to provide shelter, food, and accommodations for all that needed it–not just because it was essential for the students' well-being, but also because those actions were in line with the traditional values of the school itself, exemplifying a utilization of both the collegial and symbolic dimensions of organizational behavior. Therefore, the leadership of university presidents in the face of critical incidents is not merely a matter of applying a set of predefined strategies. Instead, it involves a contextual, reflective, and iterative process, informed by a leader's personal experiences, institutional values, and the specific nuances of each situation. Such an adaptive approach seems to be invaluable in the pursuit of effective leadership in higher education.

### *Influence of Context in Incident Handling*

The navigation of critical incidents by university presidents is influenced by the type of institution they lead, the source of the incident, and their own experience in the role. This section synthesizes findings from the earlier analysis of how these factors impact leadership responses, revealing differences in the application of dimensions of organizational behavior and offering insights into the practical implications for university leadership.

**Institutional Type.** The analysis revealed that presidents of public 2-year colleges tend to employ a balanced approach, integrating collegial, bureaucratic, and political dimensions, with lesser emphasis on systemic and symbolic dimensions. This could reflect the community-focused nature of such institutions, where collaborative decision-making, administrative procedures, and political engagement are crucial for addressing the diverse needs of their stakeholders. On the other hand, leaders at private 4-year universities show a preference for the collegial dimension, followed by bureaucratic strategies, indicating a possibly more internally focused approach to managing incidents, with less emphasis on political maneuvering compared to their public counterparts. So, there are some differences in presidents' reliance on specific dimensions by institutional type, but they are relatively minor.

**Incident Source.** The source of critical incidents—whether internal or external—also dictates the dimensions of organizational behavior that leaders are more likely to employ, with a stronger effect than seen by institutional type. Systemic responses are more prevalent in externally sourced incidents, highlighting the need for comprehensive and reflective strategies and sensors to identify and address challenges that originate beyond the institution. Internally sourced incidents see a greater use of political dimensions, pointing to the importance of managing internal stakeholder relationships and power dynamics.

Notably, external incidents often necessitate a broader utilization of dimensions of organizational behavior, which speaks to the often complex, multifaceted nature of such challenges, requiring a more versatile leadership approach.

**Presidential Experience.** Experience in the role emerged as a key factor influencing college and university presidents' responses to critical incidents and had a higher effect on dimensional utilization than either institutional type or incident source. Veteran presidents, with their additional exposure to institutional challenges, tend to employ a wider array of dimensions of organizational behavior compared to their less experienced counterparts. This may be attributed to a more developed understanding of institutional dynamics and a greater confidence in leveraging formal authority and systemic processes. Conversely, new presidents appear to lean more on the symbolic dimension, perhaps aiming to establish their vision and values as a foundation in their approach to crisis management.

**Practical Implications.** These findings show the importance of contextual factors in higher education management. The variance in leadership approaches based on institutional type, incident source, and presidential experience can provide meaningful insights to current and aspiring university presidents. Understanding that leadership effectiveness in navigating critical incidents involves a context-sensitive application of organizational behavior can lead to the pursuit of more effective or appropriate approaches, cultivation of support systems and development of training programs designed to enhance presidential leadership capabilities.

## Limitations

There were several methodological and practical limitations that bear significance in this critical incident analysis of university presidents' organizational behavior. First, there were some issues around participant accessibility and interview depth. The recruitment and participation of university presidents proved challenging due to their busy schedules, resulting in a smaller participant pool of 12 out of 22 invited. This limited availability sometimes compromised the depth of data collected, particularly with one president requiring substantial accommodation, shorter interview periods and no campus visit. Participants' hesitancy to discuss sensitive topics for fear of identification, despite the use of pseudonyms, potentially led to less transparency in certain areas, although this was somewhat mitigated by specific probing. The accessibility of university presidents was further influenced by the cooperation of their executive assistants, with variations in responsiveness affecting the ease of scheduling interviews. Additionally, the inherent power imbalance between the researcher and these high-profile participants occasionally limited the extent of tough questions, though that varied by rapport and the personal styles of the presidents.

Second, there were limitations around the study's feasibility and self-reported data. Due to the modest timeframe and available financial resources, the study was restricted in the scope of participants, both in number and geographic diversity. This meant data collection was confined to 12 university presidents within California, despite aspirations to include a broader, national sample. This geographic limitation not only narrowed the study's scope but also skewed the participant pool towards certain types of institutions, notably affecting the representation of 4-year public universities due to non-responses and the researcher's conflict of interest with one of California's 4-year public university systems. As

a result, the study leaned more heavily on presidents from 2-year public colleges, potentially impacting the findings related to institutional type. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported data from the presidents, without corroborating perspectives from other individuals involved in the critical incidents, presents validity concerns. While multiple interviews and semi-structured protocols were employed to diminish this limitation and ensure comprehensive coverage of each incident, the absence of additional viewpoints, such as presidential cabinet members or affected students, may limit the depth and accuracy of the findings. The selection bias towards available and willing participants, coupled with the constraints of self-reporting and geographical limitations, suggests caution in generalizing the study's results across under-represented contexts and institutional types.

Third, the variability in how participants interpreted the term "critical incident" emerged as an additional limitation in the study. The term's vague nature led to assorted understandings among the university presidents, with some equating it to crises or emergencies while others adopted a more flexible interpretation. This ambiguity affected the preparation and discussion of critical incidents, as some presidents arrived at interviews with multiple incidents to discuss as instructed, while others required further probing to identify relevant incidents. The researcher's occasional suggestions of incident types based on previous participants' examples might have influenced the incidents that were discussed, potentially impacting the study's findings. Although the intention was to allow presidents the freedom to define what constituted a critical incident, this approach resulted in mixed outcomes, suggesting that future research might benefit from more narrowly defined parameters for what constitutes a critical incident, such as focusing specifically on student-related incidents or responses to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Lastly, there were limitations regarding the subjective nature of categorizing and interpreting the utilization of dimensions of organizational behavior. Efforts to temper this limitation included basing the analysis on established organizational behavior conceptual frameworks and using a detailed a priori codebook for data interpretation, alongside an iterative coding process. The decision to classify the use of dimensions of organizational behavior as either primary or secondary aimed to inclusively capture their utilization rather than exclude them, potentially leading to an overestimation of presidents' proficiency with these dimensions. Although the researcher believes the assessment of dimensional utilization was accurate, the lack of triangulation due to time and resource constraints is acknowledged as a limitation.

## Recommendations

### *For Practice*

The journey to and experience of a university presidency is eased by their accumulation of experiences and exposures to the multifaceted challenges inherent in higher education leadership. Drawing from the practical experiences of university presidents like President Kimperton, who gained her experience from hard work in many roles leading up to the executive position, and President Norwood, who worked closely with a university president prior to her first presidency, it is evident there are different ways to prepare for the presidency. President Smith's eagerness and positive experience with professional development opportunities shows the value of structured learning programs in preparing for and thriving in leadership roles. It is recommended that aspiring and current university presidents pursue a balanced approach to leadership development, incorporating practical experience, mentorship, and formal professional development.

Two professional development opportunities stand out for their impact and effectiveness: the American Council on Education (ACE) Fellows Program and the Harvard Program for New Presidents. The ACE Fellows Program is a prestigious higher education leadership development program. It is designed to prepare emerging leaders for senior positions in college and university administration. ACE Fellows are typically nominated by the senior leadership of their current institutions and once selected, Fellows embark on a year-long program that includes placements at other higher education institutions. This placement allows them to gain valuable firsthand experience by working closely with experienced presidents, chancellors, provosts, and other senior administrators. The program focuses on strategic planning, budgeting, and governance, among others. Another oft-mentioned example is The Harvard Program for New Presidents, which is an executive education program offered by the Harvard Graduate School of Education. It is specifically designed for individuals who have recently assumed the presidency at their respective colleges or universities. This program aims to provide new presidents with the insights, strategies, and tools necessary to effectively lead their institutions in the challenging landscape of higher education. Typically conducted as an intensive, multi-day seminar, the program covers a wide range of topics critical to presidential leadership, including financial management, institutional advancement, faculty governance, and student success. A key feature of the Harvard Program for New Presidents is its focus on peer learning and networking. Participants have the opportunity to share experiences and best practices with fellow new presidents facing similar challenges. This collaborative approach creates a sense of community and support among leaders who are navigating the early stages of their presidency. Higher education leaders should seek out opportunities like the ACE Fellowship

Program and the Harvard Program for New Presidents to prepare them both before and after they have taken on the role of the college or university presidency. Policymakers should consider bolstering professional development experiences like these so they can offer opportunities to more educational leaders. Alternatively, they may also consider establishing similar programs at the local, state or university levels or improving upon existing programs in the same vein. Even university presidents themselves may consider developing micro-programs like these for their own campus staff and faculty to cultivate home-grown talent.

The establishment of robust networks of allies and mentors is another key recommendation for university presidents. The challenges and isolation often experienced in executive roles can be mitigated through the support and guidance of peers who understand the unique pressures of the presidency. Such networks are especially vital for presidents of color and female presidents, who navigate additional complexities, have less room for error and experience higher levels of scrutiny in their roles than their White male counterparts. Building these networks before assuming the presidency, and continuously expanding them, can provide a critical support system. By embracing these recommendations, aspiring and current university presidents can better navigate the complexities of their roles, including being more effective in serving their constituents.

### *For Future Research*

There are four recommendations for future research based on the results of this study: (a) a more specific focus on the HSI aspect, (b) predetermined or bounded critical incidents, (c) an expansion of sample size and institutional type, and (d) further triangulation of the data. First, future research should aim to more precisely explore the intersection between the HSI designation of colleges and universities and the leadership strategies

employed within these institutions. While this study highlighted how presidents at HSIs navigate critical incidents, the findings were often independent of, or were only tangentially related to, the HSI status. Future investigations could narrow the focus to issues directly impacting Latino students, exploring how HSI leadership addresses their specific educational, cultural, and social needs. There could also be specific examinations of the processes around attaining HSI funding, scrutinizing how these funds are pursued, allocated, and utilized to support the mission of serving Latino and other minority student populations. Second, adopting a more focused approach by defining a specific set of critical incidents based on predetermined criteria or themes could enhance the comparability and depth of analysis. Future studies could select critical incidents that are particularly relevant to something like those affecting support, retention, and success of students. Bounding the critical incidents could also ensure that interviews and data collection are more targeted and efficient. Third, to broaden the scope and applicability of research findings, future studies should strive for a larger sample size that includes a wider range of geographical locations and institutional types to capture a more nationally representative collection of leadership experiences and critical incidents that could lead to more reliable sub-analyses. For instance, urban universities might deal with different community-related issues than rural institutions. Finally, employing multiple data sources and methods would strengthen the validity of the findings. Future research could conduct interviews or surveys with a range of stakeholders, including vice presidents, deans, faculty, students, and staff, to gather a multi-pronged perspective on the critical incidents discussed. Further, a team of researchers could be utilized for data analysis to minimize individual biases. By embracing these

recommendations, scholars could be better equipped to inform policy, practice, and leadership development at HSIs and beyond.

**Final Thoughts and Personal Reflections**

The changing demographics and diversification of student bodies across the state in recent decades has called for a new generation of leaders. The traditional pathway to the presidency through faculty and academic affairs is no longer the common pathway. And the face of the university presidency is no longer older, White, and male, in part because the role must be more diverse to reflect the college campuses of today and tomorrow. 2-year public colleges seem to be leading the way in this regard, in terms of both the shift in demographics of their students and their leadership. Many of the recent presidential hires in this sector are passionate, young professionals of color, who reflect the non-traditional personal backgrounds of the students they serve. While 2-year public colleges have long been diverse institutions, the private universities included in this study have more recently converted from predominantly White institutions to HSIs which has had a significant impact on institutional priorities, needs and even revenue streams, which at times has threatened their viability due to the shifts in the balance of revenue and financial aid. These circumstances and new realities demand leaders who align with the culture of their campus and its members, who understand the issues their constituents face and are pragmatic in determining how to best serve them despite scarce resources, challenging interpersonal dynamics and structural societal inequalities.

Historically, key research on higher education leadership has suggested that the impact of university presidents might be limited due to the distinctive shared governance structures within many institutions (Birnbaum, 1992; Cohen & March, 1974). There is no

doubt that leaders of colleges and universities are at the whim of much that is out of their control, such as natural disasters, rogue employees, volatile political climates or even the sins of their predecessors. But a good and effective leader can be truly invaluable to their campus. Judging from the data I collected, the interactions I had and the on-the-ground campus experiences I witnessed, the presidents in this study are right-minded people, predominantly from humble beginnings, and are deeply committed to serving their students, faculty, and staff. Some have conceptualized, implemented, and overseen transformative overhauls of institutional processes, infrastructure, and services. That is not to say they have not had their challenges, hiccups, or failures–many of them have. But these presidents are driven by the premise that they can have a truly added value effect on their campuses, because many of them really do. While there seems to be no perfect recipe for success, effective college and university leaders would do well to keep these aims in mind, as well as an intentionality to align with the existing and espoused culture and mission of the campus they lead. By combining those two components they maximize their ability to further organizational outcomes like student success and mitigate the likelihood of becoming the next one on the chopping block.

Unfortunately, too often these diverse leaders, particularly women presidents and presidents of color, experience higher levels of scrutiny and less margin for error than their White male counterparts. This has the potential to hamper their ability to lead boldly and further constricts the pipeline to the presidency for these communities by weeding out quality leaders prematurely. I argue that policymakers and higher education governance boards should provide young and diverse presidents with the support required to be successful. Over the past few years, and even more so over recent decades, the presidential

position has become increasingly complex, fraught, and thankless. While some leaders are well-compensated for their roles, sometimes to an excessive degree, not all are, and the substantial sacrifices required for effective leadership can impose significant burdens on both the individuals and their families. Our schools, especially minority serving institutions like HSIs who serve some of the most vulnerable populations, need quality, ethical and compassionate leaders more than ever—and it is imperative that we continue to investigate and support the development and success of current and future leaders alike.

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**Appendix A: Invitation Letter**

DD MM YYYY

Dear _____,

My name is Isaac Castro, and I am a doctoral student in the Department of Education at UC Santa Barbara (UCSB). I have been working with my advisor, Dr. Jeffrey Milem, at UCSB on issues pertaining to equity and educational leadership in higher education organizations. I am currently working on my dissertation, which will examine the organizational behavior of college and university leaders of Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs). Specifically, I hope to explore how college and university leaders came to their position, got to know their campus, and the way they have navigated critical incidents on the job.

At some point before the end of this Fall I would like to conduct **two interviews** with you across two days. The interviews will be semi-structured in format and will run **45 to 60 minutes**, ideally in-person at your home campus. The first interview will explore your background, ascent to the presidency, and the process you went through to get familiarized with your campus. The second interview will delve into critical incidents (major events, occurrences, and circumstances) of your choosing, which have taken place during your presidency, and the role you played in them.

As the son of a former university leader, I understand firsthand how busy your schedules can be. However, I would be extremely humbled and appreciative of the opportunity to include you in this important research. My hope is that this study will

provide educational leaders, prospective college or university presidents and other campus stakeholders with a deeper understanding of the realities and demands of your position—and ways to operate within it to achieve organizational goals.

If you would be open and available to these two interviews, please reply with your confirmation and we will coordinate our schedules accordingly.

You can reach me at i_castro@ucsb.edu or (805)729-0720.

Best,

Isaac Manuel Jesus Castro

PhD Candidate and Graduate Research Assistant

Department of Education

University of California, Santa Barbara

**Appendix B: Informed Consent**

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

The Organizational Behavior of University Presidents at Hispanic Serving Institutions: A Critical Incident Analysis

**Purpose:** I am Isaac Castro, a doctoral student at the University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB), and I am requesting your participation in a dissertation research study. The purpose of this study is to learn more about the leaders of Hispanic Serving Institutions, with a focus on their (a) pathways to the presidency, (b) transition and integration with their campus, and (c) navigation of critical incidents on the job. Your contribution to this study will help deepen our understanding of the lived perspectives of university leaders.

**Procedures:** If you decide to participate, I hope to conduct two interviews with you. The first interview will investigate your background, ascent to the presidency, and the process you went through to get familiarized with your campus. The second interview will delve into five critical incidents (major events, occurrences, and circumstances) of your choosing, which have taken place during your presidency, and the role you played in them. The first interview will be held in-person at your campus and the second interview will take place remotely on a separate date. The interviews will be recorded via audio recorder with your permission and will last 60 minutes. You may skip questions you do not wish to answer or stop an interview at any time.

**Risks/Benefits:** There is little perceived risk to participating in this research study. The final study will have no identifiable information. There are no direct benefits to

participating in this study. However, the findings may better help educational leaders, prospective university presidents and other university stakeholders understand the realities and demands of your position—and ways to operate within it to achieve organizational goals.

**Confidentiality:** Audio files will be recorded via audio recorder. Audio files will be transcribed via Otter.ai. Audio files and transcripts will only be available to the researcher and his faculty advisor, Dr. Jeffrey Milem at UCSB. All individuals' names will be omitted from the study, and a pseudonym will be used in place of your name. All recordings will be encrypted when saved and the researcher will establish a password to further protect the information.

**Data Usage:** Audio recordings and transcripts will be used as a primary data source for the study and any subsequent related publications and/or conference presentations. Direct quotations may be used. In addition, I request to keep the recordings for possible use in my future research studies on university leaders. However, I will protect your privacy in the future in the same way as in this study, and the data will only be used for academic purposes.

**Right to Refuse or Withdraw:** Certain interview questions may appear too personal and cause you some discomfort. You may refrain from answering any questions you do not wish to answer and may withdraw from the interview at any time without question from the researcher.

**Costs:** There is no cost for you to participate.

**Questions:** If you have any questions about this research project, please contact:

Isaac Castro

Gevirtz Graduate School of Education

University of California, Santa Barbara

i_castro@ucsb.edu

805-729-0720

If you have any questions regarding your rights and participation as a research subject, please contact the Human Subjects Committee at (805) 893-3807 or hsc@research.ucsb.edu. Or write to the University of California, Human Subjects Committee, Office of Research, Santa Barbara, CA 93106

Please sign below if you agree to participate in this research study as detailed above. You will be sent an electronic copy.

Full Name of Participant: _____

Signature of Participant: _____ Date: _____

## Appendix C: Interview Protocol

### SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

The Organizational Behavior of University Presidents at Hispanic Serving Institutions: A Critical Incident Analysis

*Participant* **(Title and Full Name)**, *(Name of Institution)*

### Interview #1: Background and Familiarization with Campus

*Introduction and Background*

My first few questions have to do with your background and experience as a leader in higher education.

- You haven't always been a **(title)**, so let's take a step back and explore how you got to this point first. Can you talk a bit about your family background and upbringing?
- Were there any pivotal moments or individuals who influenced your decision to pursue a leadership role in academia?

*Journey to the Presidency*

- Can you briefly describe your educational and professional pathway leading up to becoming a President? What steps did you take, if any, and which do you think were particularly crucial?
- Were there any specific challenges or barriers you faced in your ascent to the presidency? How did you overcome them?

- Conversely, were there any key facilitators, mentors or supports that aided your journey?

*Familiarization with the Campus*

- How did you initially familiarize yourself with the campus and its unique dynamics, especially given its designation as a Hispanic Serving Institution?
- What were the key resources or individuals that assisted in your familiarization?
    - Were there any significant detractors, critics or rivals that hindered you?
- At what point did you feel fully familiarized with the campus?
    - How would you describe the culture of **(name of university)**?
- Can you describe any specific challenges or opportunities you encountered related to the Hispanic-serving aspect of the institution?
- Beyond just the number of Latino students enrolled at **(name of university)**, in what ways do you believe this campus is a Hispanic-serving institution?

*Conclusion/Additional Thoughts*

- Is there anything else about your journey or familiarization with the campus that you believe is important to mention or that I haven't touched upon?

That's it for today, but before we meet for the final interview, I would like you to think of a few critical incidents that you've navigated during your presidency. For this study, a critical incident could be any major event, occurrence, or circumstance that you have encountered as **(title)** at **(name of university)** as defined by you. We'll discuss these incidents in detail next time.

**Interview #2: Navigating Critical Incidents**

Today we will delve deeper into your experiences as president by examining the critical incidents you've faced during your tenure at **(name of university)** and understanding how you have managed and learned from these situations.

*Definition of Critical Incidents*

- How do you define a "critical incident" within the context of your role as a college president?

*Nature of Critical Incidents*

I'd like you to think of three significant, critical incidents you've had to navigate during your time as president. We'll discuss each of them separately.

- Can you describe the first critical incident?
- What were the main challenges posed by this incident?
- Were there any stakeholders or specific groups particularly affected by this incident?

*Management and Decision-making*

- How did you approach decision-making during this critical incident?
- Were there any resources, advisors, or teams you particularly relied upon during this time?
- Were there any potential risks or trade-offs being considered?

*Outcomes and Learning*

- How was this incident resolved? Were there any lingering effects or ongoing challenges?
- Reflecting on this incident, what did you learn about leadership, your institution, and/or yourself?

[Repeat questions/probes for each of the 3 critical incidents or until time runs out.]

*Role of Hispanic-serving Aspect*

- Did the designation of your institution as a Hispanic Serving Institution play a role in how you navigated these incidents?
- Were there specific considerations or challenges that arose due to this designation?

*Conclusion/Additional Insights*

- Is there any other critical incident or related experience you believe is important to share?
- Based on your experiences, do you have any advice for future leaders navigating similar challenges?
- Is there anything that I haven't asked you that you'd like to add?

## Appendix D: A Priori Codebook

**CODEBOOK**

**The Organizational Behavior of University Presidents at Hispanic Serving Institutions:**

**A Critical Incident Analysis**

Isaac Manuel Jesus Castro

University of California, Santa Barbara

In addition to the cited authors listed below, the codes in this codebook were derived from Berger & Milem's (2000) "Overview of Multidimensional Models and Classifications of Theories of Organizational Behavior".

**Bureaucratic Organizational Behavior**: Formal and rule-based approach to management and decision-making within an organization. It encompasses practices that emphasize order, consistency, and rationality in the administration and governance of the institution. Bureaucratic behavior is characterized by a clear hierarchy of authority, strict adherence to established procedures and policies, division of labor based on specialization, and decision-making based on objective data and analysis. This approach prioritizes efficiency and stability in organizational operations, often relying on formalized rules and standardized processes. In the context of university administration, it captures how university presidents utilize these principles to manage complex educational institutions, maintain control, ensure accountability, and achieve organizational goals.

- **Data-Driven Decision-Making**: Decisions based on data analysis, empirical evidence, and quantifiable information. It is used when university presidents prioritize objective data over subjective opinion in their decision-making processes. (Birnbaum, 1988; Bolman & Deal, 1992; Bush, 2006; Kuh, 2003)
- **Division of Labor**: The delegation and distribution of tasks and responsibilities among different departments, units, or individuals. It highlights how university presidents organize work, delineate roles, and assign tasks to optimize specialization and expertise within the university structure. (Weber, 1947)
- **Efficiency**: Achieving desired outcomes quickly and without redundancy. It captures instances where university presidents focus on streamlining processes and maximizing resource utilization for better organizational performance. (Pfeffer, 1982; Bush, 2006)
- **Hierarchical Authority**: The structured layers of authority and decision-making power within the organization. It identifies instances where university presidents enforce or rely on a ranked system of governance, with clear lines of authority, to maintain order and direction. (Weber, 1947)
- **Productivity**: The effectiveness and output of the organization's activities. It identifies how university presidents strive to enhance the quantity and quality of work produced by the university. (Pfeffer, 1982; Bush, 2006)
- **Rational Goals**: Objective setting that prioritizes logical and pragmatic outcomes. In the context of university presidents, it captures instances where decisions and actions are guided by clear, measurable, and attainable objectives. (Weber, 1947)

- **Rules**: Formal rules, policies, and standard operating procedures govern behavior and decision-making. It identifies how university presidents implement and adhere to established regulations to maintain consistency, fairness, and order within the university. (Birnbaum, 1988; Bush, 2006)

**Collegial Organizational Behavior**: A management and interaction style that emphasizes mutual respect, collaboration, and shared decision-making among members of the organization. In a collegial model, leadership is characterized by fostering a sense of community. It involves university presidents actively encouraging participation, open communication, and cooperative relationships among faculty, staff, and students. Collegial behavior in a university context is marked by efforts to address human needs, motivate members, build consensus, and ensure equal and fair treatment. It reflects a culture where formal hierarchies are downplayed in favor of egalitarian practices.

- **Community**: Instances where there is a focus on fostering a sense of belonging, unity, and shared identity among members of the organization. It includes the initiatives of university presidents to build a strong, inclusive, and supportive campus community. (Bowen & Schuster, 1986; Birnbaum, 1988)
- **Consensus Building**: Efforts to reach collective agreement or alignment among diverse stakeholders. It involves university presidents facilitating dialogue, negotiation, and collaboration to arrive at decisions that are acceptable to all or most involved parties. (Perrow, 1973; Birnbaum, 1988)
- **Cooperation**: Contexts where teamwork, collaboration, and mutual support are evident. It captures the actions of university presidents in promoting a cooperative

culture, encouraging individuals and departments to work together towards common goals. (Birnbaum, 1988)

- **Equal and Fair Treatment**: Actions and policies that ensure impartiality, fairness, and equality in the treatment of all members of the organization. It signifies the commitment of university presidents to non-discriminatory practices, equal opportunities, and fairness in all aspects of university life. (Bowen & Schuster, 1986)
- **Human Needs**: Instances where the focus is on recognizing and addressing the personal and professional needs of individuals within the organization. It includes actions by university presidents that cater to the well-being, work-life balance, personal development, and job satisfaction of faculty, staff, and students. (Perrow, 1986; Bensimon et al., 1989; Shafritz & Ott, 1992; Bolman & Deal, 1991)
- **Motivation**: Practices aimed at inspiring, encouraging, and stimulating individuals to achieve their best performance and to contribute positively to the organization. It captures how university presidents foster an environment that motivates individuals through recognition, rewards, and other incentives. (Follett, 1926)
- **Informal Contact**: Non-formal interactions and relationships within the organization. It encompasses the ways university presidents encourage and engage in casual, informal communications and interactions that contribute to a more cohesive, friendly, and supportive organizational atmosphere. (Perrow, 1973)

**Political Organizational Behavior**: The dynamics of power and influence within the organizational setting. It encapsulates the ways in which individuals and groups within the university exert influence, engage in competition, and navigate conflicts to achieve their objectives. Political behavior in this context involves the use of tactics such as negotiation, coalition-building, networking, and the strategic allocation of scarce resources to gain advantages or advance specific agendas. The political model highlights how university presidents and other key figures manage and leverage relationships and organizational resources to shape outcomes, distribute rewards, and maintain or alter the status quo. It reflects an understanding that organizational life involves complex social and power dynamics where political considerations play a critical role.

- **Influence**: Actions and strategies used by individuals or groups to affect or sway decision-making processes and outcomes within the organization. It includes ways university presidents and other stakeholders use their position, expertise, or relationships to guide or control organizational directions and policies. (Bacharach & Lawler, 1980; Hoyle, 1982)
- **Conflict**: Instances of disagreement, opposition, or discord among members or groups within the organization. It encompasses how university presidents manage and respond to conflicts arising from differences in opinions, interests, or values among various stakeholders. (Morgan, 2011)
- **Competition**: Situations of rivalry where individuals or groups are vying for limited resources, recognition, or opportunities. It captures the dynamics of competition within the university setting. (Morgan, 2011)

- **Negotiation**: The process of discussing and reaching agreements between parties with differing interests. It highlights instances where university presidents engage in negotiations to resolve conflicts or make decisions, often requiring compromise and diplomacy. (Bolman & Deal, 1992; Morgan, 2011)
- **Coalitions**: Individuals or groups form alliances to pursue common interests or goals. It includes the formation of formal or informal partnerships within the university, focusing on how these coalitions influence decisions or policies. (Pfeffer, 1981; Birnbaum, 1988; Morgan, 2011)
- **Networking**: The building and maintaining of relationships and connections within and outside the organization for mutual benefit. It captures how university presidents and others use their professional networks to gain support, gather information, or leverage influence. (Birnbaum, 1988)
- **Allocation of Scarce Resources**: The decision-making processes related to distributing limited resources such as funding, staffing, or facilities. It focuses on how university presidents prioritize and make difficult choices under resource constraints, often involving strategic considerations and trade-offs. (Bush, 2006; Pfeffer, 1981)
- **Rewards**: Distribution of benefits, incentives, or recognition to individuals or groups within the organization. It captures how rewards are used as a means of motivation, encouragement, or acknowledgment of contributions or achievements. (Bush, 2006)
- **Exchange**: Instances of reciprocal interactions where resources, support, or favors are traded between individuals or groups. It includes how university presidents

and stakeholders engage in exchanges to achieve individual or mutual goals. (Kuh, 2003)

**Symbolic Organizational Behavior**: The actions, practices, and elements within an organization that convey meaning beyond their functional purpose. It encompasses the use of rituals, ceremonies, and myths to express and reinforce the culture, values, and identity of the university. Symbolic behavior involves understanding how these non-tangible elements contribute to creating a shared sense of purpose, belonging, and understanding among members of the university community. It recognizes that many aspects of organizational life are deeply embedded in the symbols and meanings that individuals and groups attach to their experiences and environment. This approach highlights how university presidents engage in and facilitate sensemaking, manage ambiguity, and utilize symbolic actions.

- **Ambiguity**: Situations or information that are unclear, uncertain, or open to multiple interpretations. It captures how university presidents and other stakeholders navigate and manage ambiguity, particularly in decision-making, policy formation, and communication. (Birnbaum, 1988; Bolman & Deal, 1992; Bush, 2006)
- **Artifacts**: Physical objects or material aspects that represent or convey the culture, values, or history of the organization. It encompasses things like university logos, architecture, memorabilia, or dress codes, and how they contribute to the university's identity and sense of community. (Tierney, 1988)
- **Ceremonies**: Formal events or public observances that have symbolic significance for the organization. It includes how university presidents participate

in and use ceremonies (like graduation, convocations, or award ceremonies) to express values, achievements, and traditions of the university. (Bolman & Deal, 1992)

- **Myths**: Includes widely held but oversimplified or idealized beliefs, stories, or narratives that shape the culture and identity of the organization. It includes the creation, perpetuation, and impact of these myths within the university setting. (Bolman & Deal, 1992)
- **Purpose**: The underlying reasons, goals, or objectives that give meaning to the organization's existence. It includes how university presidents communicate and embody the institution's mission, vision, and values, and how these elements are perceived and internalized by members of the university community. (Cohen & March, 1974; Birnbaum, 1988)
- **Rituals**: Customary practices or procedures that are regular and significant within the organization. It captures how university presidents and the community engage in rituals that reinforce culture, values, and group identity, such as orientation events, annual celebrations, or regular meetings. (Bolman & Deal, 1992)
- **Sensemaking**: The process by which individuals interpret and construct the reality of organizational events or changes. It includes how university presidents and others make sense of complex, uncertain, or ambiguous situations, shaping how these are understood and responded to within the university. (Weick, 1976; Birnbaum, 1988; Bolman & Deal, 1992)
- **Shared Meaning**: The common understanding or collective interpretation of symbols, events, or behaviors within the organization. It captures how university

presidents and community members establish and share meanings that contribute to a cohesive organizational culture. (Birnbaum 1988; Tierney, 1988)

**Systemic Organizational Behavior**: An approach to organizational analysis and management that emphasizes the interdependence and interconnectedness of various components within the organization. Systemic behavior includes the implementation of mechanisms for feedback, adaptation, and learning, acknowledging that changes in one part of the system can have wide-reaching effects on other parts. University presidents employing a systemic perspective focus on how the university aligns with and adapts to external environments, emphasizing the importance of continuous learning, evolution, and responsiveness to internal and external changes. Systemic organizational behavior highlights the importance of understanding the complex webs of cause and effect, and managing the university not just as a collection of independent parts, but as an integrated and dynamic entity.

- **Interacting Components**: Elements within the organization that interact with and impact each other. It includes how university presidents understand and manage the relationship between different departments, groups, and individuals, recognizing that changes in one area can affect others. (Birnbaum, 1988)
- **Sensors**: Methods or tools used to gather information and feedback about the organization's internal and external environments. It captures how university presidents use mechanisms like surveys, performance metrics, or external evaluations to monitor, assess, and respond to organizational needs and changes. (Birnbaum, 1988)

- **Cognitive Learning**: The processes through which the organization as a whole learns and adapts based on experiences and information. It includes how university presidents foster an environment that encourages learning, knowledge sharing, and adaptation, influencing the collective understanding and capabilities of the university. (Crowson, Boyd & Mawhinney, 1996)
- **Isomorphism**: The process by which organizations within a particular field tend to resemble each other over time. It captures how university presidents respond to external pressures and trends, leading to similarities in structures, practices, and policies across different universities. (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Scott, 1995)

**Pathway to the Presidency** (Castro, 2018; Castro, 2022)

- **Family Background**: The influence of a candidate's family environment, including parental occupations, socioeconomic status, educational levels, values, and support systems, on their journey to the university presidency. It captures information about early life influences, family expectations, and any family-related factors that contributed to their career trajectory.
- **Education**: The formal educational experiences of individuals on their path to becoming university presidents. It includes the levels of education attained, fields of study, institutions attended, academic achievements, and the impact of these educational experiences on their career paths.
- **Key People**: Identifies mentors, colleagues, advisors, and other significant individuals who have played a crucial role in influencing, guiding, or supporting the individual's journey to the presidency. It looks at the nature of these

relationships, the advice or guidance provided, and the impact these people have had on the individual.

- **Professional Development**: The participation in leadership development programs, workshops, conferences, and any other form of training or development that prepared the university presidents for high-level administrative roles.
- **Challenges and Obstacles**: The personal and professional hurdles faced by individuals on their path to the university presidency. It includes challenges such as balancing personal and professional life, overcoming discrimination or bias, navigating institutional politics, and any other significant barriers..
- **Previous Jobs**: The career trajectory of the individual, including previous positions held within or outside academia, roles in administration, and other relevant experiences that contributed to their qualifications for the presidency.
- **Inspirations for the Presidency**: The motivations, aspirations, and influences that inspired the individual to pursue a university presidency.

**Campus Familiarization** (Tierney, 1988; Castro, 2022)

- **Initial Experience**: First impressions, observations, and interactions that a new university president has upon entering their role. It includes their initial assessments of the university's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and challenges, as well as their early priorities and plans. Also captures the president's initial steps to establish their presence and start their leadership tenure.
- **Allies and Detractors**: Key individuals and groups within the university that either support or oppose the new president's agenda and leadership style. Allies may include faculty, staff, students, and external stakeholders who are aligned

with the president's vision and objectives. Detractors, on the other hand, may consist of those who are resistant to change or skeptical of the president's initiatives. Explores how the president identifies, engages with, and manages these relationships.

- **Full Familiarization**: The stage at which, if at all, the university president has gained a comprehensive understanding of the institution's operations, culture, and key issues. Captures the strategies employed by the president to achieve a full grasp of the university's complexities.
- **Campus Culture**: The norms, values, beliefs, and practices that define the university's community and influence its functioning. It includes the president's perceptions and evaluations of the campus culture.

## Appendix E

### Analysis of Dimension Utilization by Critical Incident

### Overview of Dimensions of Organizational Behavior Used in Critical Incidents

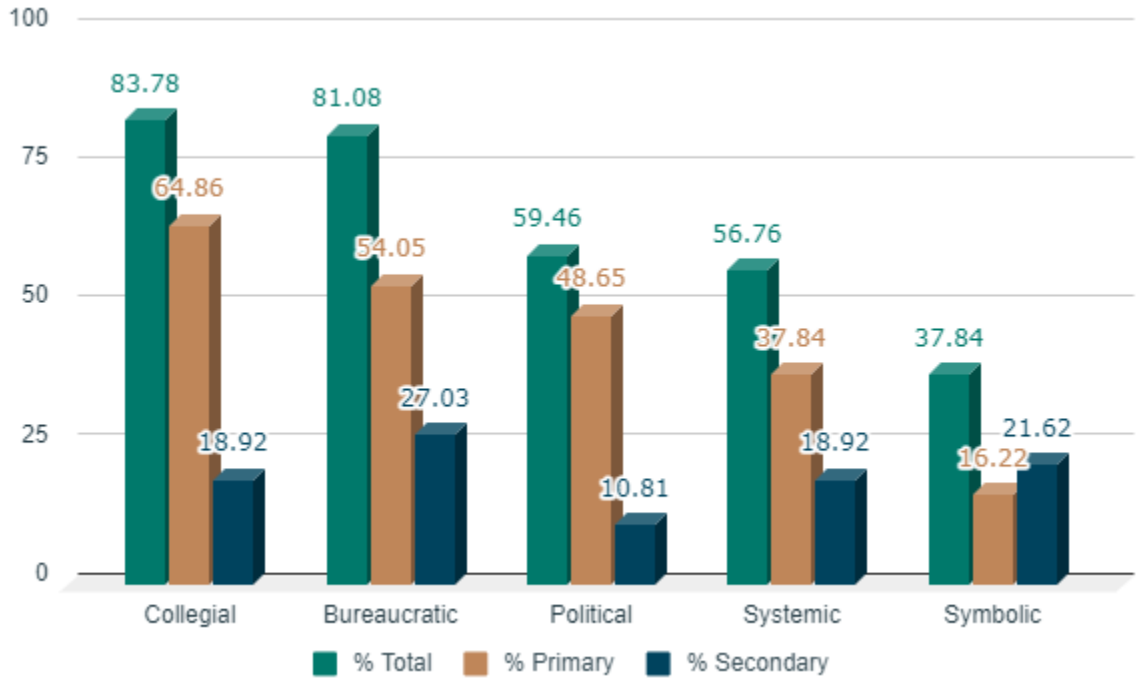
A total of 37 critical incidents discussed by 12 college presidents were analyzed based on their usage of five dimensions of organizational behavior: collegial, bureaucratic, political, systemic, and symbolic (see Table 2 above in-text). The findings indicate that, on average, college presidents utilized 3.19 dimensions of organizational behavior to address and resolve critical incidents, with every president employing at least two dimensions. The primary utilization of these dimensions, however, averaged 2.22, revealing that 62.16% of the incidents predominantly involved two dimensions. Only a minimal fraction of the incidents (5.4%) saw four dimensions primarily utilized, and notably, none of the incidents primarily involved all five dimensions. Furthermore, a mere 10.81% of the incidents predominantly relied on a single dimension, with no incidents lacking a primarily utilized dimension entirely. Secondary utilization of these dimensions was less varied, averaging just under 1 (.97), with 70.27% of incidents involving one secondarily utilized dimension and 18.92% lacking a secondarily utilized dimension altogether.

The collegial dimension was employed in 83.78% of incidents, being a primary factor in 64.8% and secondary in 18.92%. The bureaucratic dimension was used in 81.08% of incidents, with primary utilization in 54.05% of cases and secondary in 27.03%. The political dimension was referenced in 59.46% of incidents, primarily in 48.65% and secondarily in 10.81%. The systemic dimension was applied in 56.76% of incidents, with

37.84% primary and 18.92% secondary utilization. Lastly, the symbolic dimension was engaged in 37.84% of incidents, being primarily utilized in 16.22% and secondarily in 21.62% (see Figure 4 below).

**Figure 4**

*Dimensions of Organizational Behavior Utilized by % of Total Critical Incidents*




**Analysis of Critical Incidents by Institutional Type**

Among the 12 presidents included in this study, there were three institutional types represented: (a) public 2-year, (b) public 4-year and (c) private 4-year. Of the 37 total critical incidents, 18 were from presidents of public 2-year colleges, five were from public 4-year universities and 14 were from private 4-year universities (see Table 5 below). While I compare the results among the three institutional types in this section, the fact that only five critical incidents were drawn from 4-year public universities makes it

difficult to draw significant conclusions in a comparison of 2-year public colleges and 4-year private universities with multiple times the critical incidents.

At 2-year public colleges, presidents on average engaged 3.22 dimensions of organizational behavior to tackle critical incidents. The primary engagement of these dimensions showed an average of 2.17, with two dimensions predominantly involved in 66.67% of the incidents. A small percentage of incidents (5.56%) involved four dimensions as the main approach, but no incidents used all five dimensions primarily. Additionally, only 14.28% of incidents mainly relied on one dimension, and all incidents had at least one dimension predominantly used. The average for secondary utilization was slightly over one (1.06), with one dimension being secondarily utilized in 83.33% of incidents and 11.11% having no secondary dimension used. Specifically, the collegial dimension was used in some form in 83.33% of incidents, primarily in 61.11% and secondarily in 22.22%. The bureaucratic dimension was close behind, present in 77.28% of incidents, with primary use in 55.56% and secondary in 22.22%. The political dimension was part of 61.11% of incidents, with primary use in 55.56% and secondary in 5.56%. The systemic dimension was utilized in 61.11% of incidents, with 33.33% as primary and 27.78% as secondary. Finally, the symbolic dimension was involved in 38.89% of incidents, primarily in 11.11% and secondarily in 27.78%.

**Table 5**

*Average Number of Dimensions of Organizational Behavior Utilized by Institutional Type*

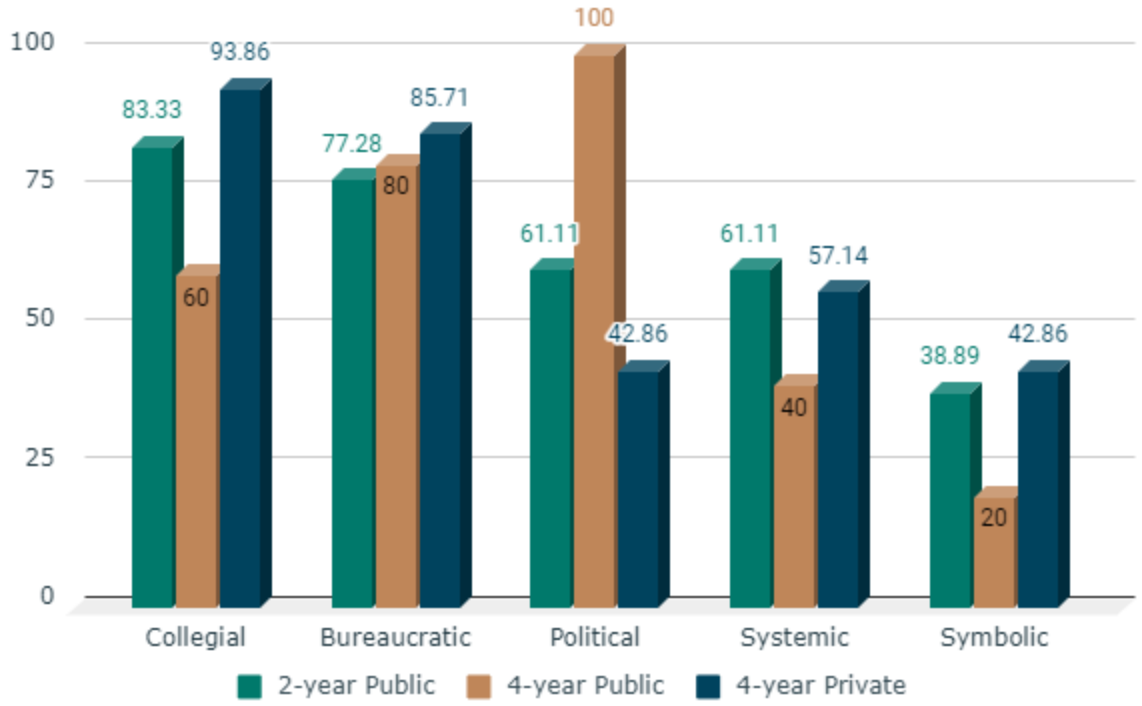
| Institutional Type | Primary | Secondary | Total |
|---|---|---|---|
| 2-year Public (n = 18) | 2.17 | 1.06 | 3.22 |
| 4-year Public (n = 5) | 1.8 | 1.2 | 3 |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 4-year Private (n = 14) | 2.43 | 0.79 | 3.21 |
| Total Average | 2.22 | 0.97 | 3.19 |

At 4-year public colleges, presidents on average engaged three dimensions of organizational behavior to manage critical incidents, with the primary engagement of these dimensions averaging at 1.8. No incident involved more than three dimensions as the primary strategy, yet all incidents had at least one dimension predominantly utilized. The average for secondary utilization stood at 1.2, with 80% of incidents involving one dimension in this capacity. Specifically, the collegial dimension was active in 60% of incidents, primarily in 40% and secondarily in 20%. The bureaucratic dimension was close behind, present in 80% of incidents, split evenly between primary and secondary uses at 40% each. The political dimension played a role in all incidents, with a primary involvement in 40% and a secondary in 60%. The systemic dimension was utilized in 40% of incidents, exclusively as a primary strategy. Lastly, the symbolic dimension was part of the strategy in 20% of incidents, always as a primary utilization.

**Figure 5**

*Dimensions of Organizational Behavior Utilized by % of Critical Incidents by Institutional Type*

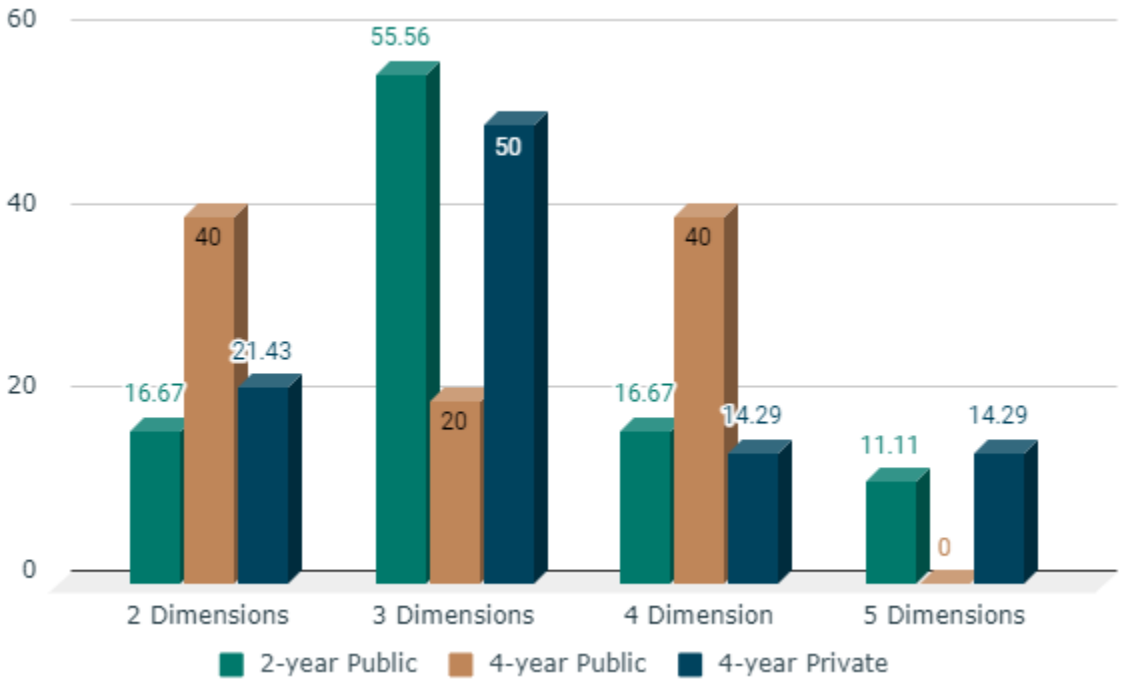



At 4-year private universities, the average use of dimensions of organizational behavior by presidents to tackle critical incidents was 3.21. The primary engagement with these dimensions had an average of 2.43, with two dimensions being the most common approach in 64.29% of cases. A small portion of incidents (7.14%) involved four dimensions primarily, while none used all five dimensions or relied solely on one dimension. Every incident had at least one dimension primarily utilized. Secondary engagement averaged just below one (.79), with 64.29% of incidents involving one secondary dimension and 28.57% having no secondary dimension utilized. Specifically, the collegial dimension was utilized in 92.86% of incidents, primarily in 78.57% and secondarily in 14.29%. The bureaucratic dimension was employed in 85.71% of cases, with a primary use in 57.14% and secondary in 22.22%. The political dimension was present in 42.86% of incidents, always as a primary utilization. The systemic dimension was used in 57.14% of incidents, with 42.86% as primary and 14.29% as secondary.

Finally, the symbolic dimension was part of the strategy in 42.86% of incidents, with an equal split of 21.43% for both primary and secondary uses.

**Figure 6**

*Number of Total Dimensions of Organizational Behavior Utilized by Institutional Type*




*Note.* The number listed is the percentage of total critical incidents within an institutional type.

**Analysis of Critical Incidents by Source**

This section will examine whether there are any appreciable differences in the deployment of dimensions of organizational behavior between critical incidents that come from internal or external sources. Of the 37 total critical incidents included in this study, 20 were sourced internally and 17 were sourced externally. President Dale's "The Fire on Campus" is a good example of an externally sourced critical incident, where a regional fire encroached on the campus and created an emergency situation. Whereas

President Pennington's "Deal Made, Salary Cut" is an example of an internally sourced critical incident since the issue began over faculty salary negotiations. The source of a few critical incidents are not so clear cut, but they were ultimately determined by whether the sourcing was predominantly internal or external. For example, in President Lawson's "Spaces and Support" the initial conversation that spurred his action was with a campus Latino student support group. However, the students were prompted to seek out the President within a large societal context of the George Floyd murders and how those national conversations were playing out at Faithway. Due to that initial sourcing, "Spaces and Support" was labeled as having an external source.

**Table 6**

*Average Number of Dimensions of Organizational Behavior Utilized by Source*

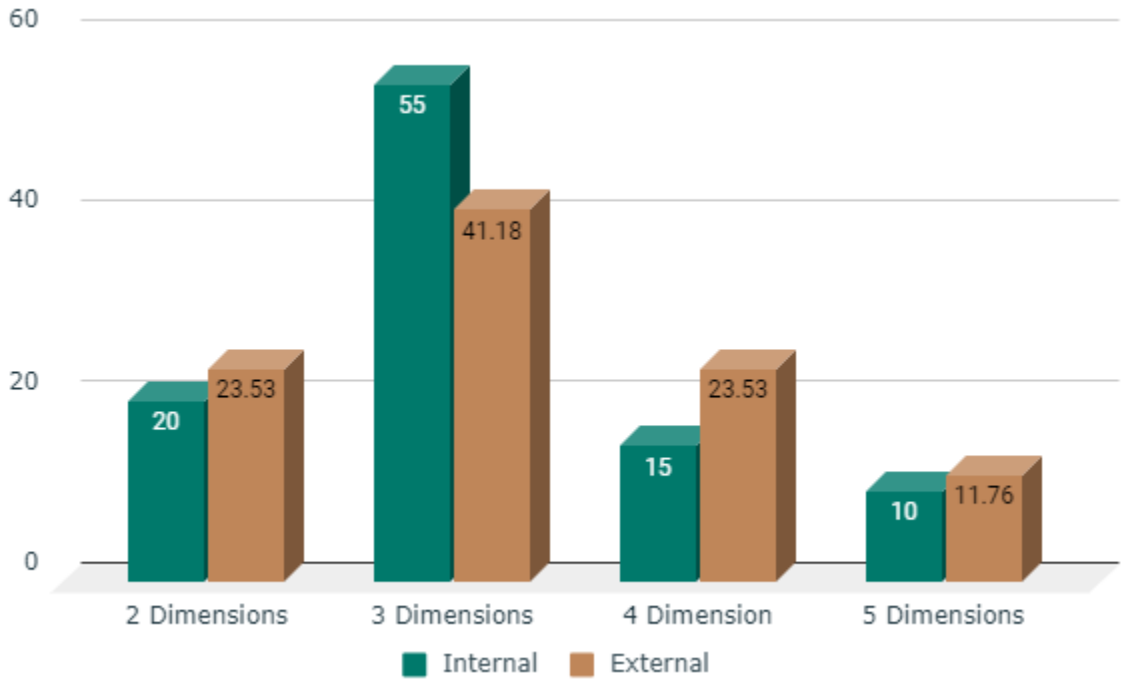
| Source | Primary | Secondary | Total |
|---|---|---|---|
| Internal (n = 20) | 2.35 | 0.88 | 3.15 |
| External (n = 17) | 2.1 | 1.05 | 3.24 |
| Total | 2.22 | 0.97 | 3.19 |

Presidents navigating internally sourced critical incidents utilized, on average, 3.15 dimensions of organizational behavior, with 55% of incidents requiring three dimensions and 25% resulting in the usage of four or more dimensions. Internally sourced critical incidents also averaged 2.35 primarily utilized dimensions of organizational behavior and .88 secondarily utilized dimensions (see Table 3 above). In comparison, leaders working through externally sourced critical incidents deployed 3.24 dimensions of organizational behavior on average with three dimensions used in 41.18% of externally initiated incidents and 35.29% of those incidents resulting in the usage of

four or more dimensions (see Figure 9 below). These incidents averaged 2.1 primarily utilized dimensions of organizational behavior and 1.05 secondarily utilized dimensions.

**Figure 7**

*Number of Total Dimensions of Organizational Behavior Utilized by Source*

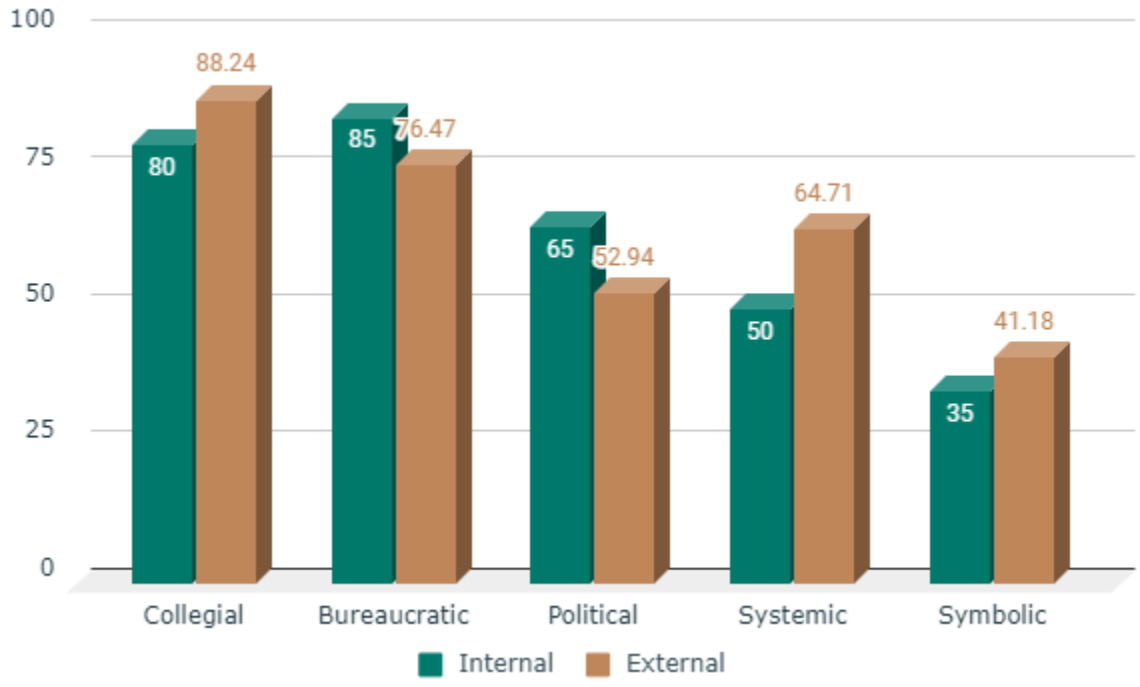



In critical incidents originating internally, the collegial dimension of organizational behavior was used 80% of the time, with 60% as primary and 20% as secondary applications (see Figure 10 below). The bureaucratic dimension was slightly more prevalent at 85%, split between 55% primary and 30% secondary use. Political dimension engagement was observed in 65% of these incidents, with 55% primary and 10% secondary utilization. The systemic dimension was applied in 50% of the cases, evenly divided between primary and secondary use at 25% each. The symbolic dimension had the least application, seen in 35% of incidents, with primary use in 15% and secondary in 20%.

For incidents with external origins, the collegial dimension was employed in 88.24% of cases, with primary use in 70.59% and secondary in 17.65%. The bureaucratic dimension's overall use was 76.47%, with primary application in 52.94% and secondary in 23.53%. Political dimension usage was recorded in 52.94% of these incidents, including 41.18% primary and 11.76% secondary applications. The systemic dimension was involved in 64.71% of the incidents, with a primary use rate of 52.94% and secondary at 11.76%. Finally, the symbolic dimension was utilized in 41.18% of external incidents, with 17.65% primary and 23.53% secondary applications.

**Figure 8**

*Dimensions of Organizational Behavior Utilized by % of Critical Incidents by Source*




**Analysis of Critical Incidents by Years as President**

This section will take a look at whether there are any observable differences in the utilization of dimensions of organizational behavior between critical incidents that come

from presidents with more than five years of experience in the role and those that have less. Of the 37 total critical incidents included in this study, 18 came from six presidents with over five years of presidential experience while 19 came from six presidents with less. Previous presidencies were included in the determination of each president's total years of experience, which pertained to Presidents Norwood, Vega, and Easton. The duration of presidential experience was also according to years of time in the role at the time data was collected during the Fall of 2023. Five was selected as the dividing point because that is about the average tenure for a college president (ACE, 2023). For the rest of this section presidents with over five years of experience will be referred to as "veteran presidents" and presidents with less will be referred to as "new presidents".

**Table 7**

*Average Number of Dimensions of Organizational Behavior Utilized by Years as President*

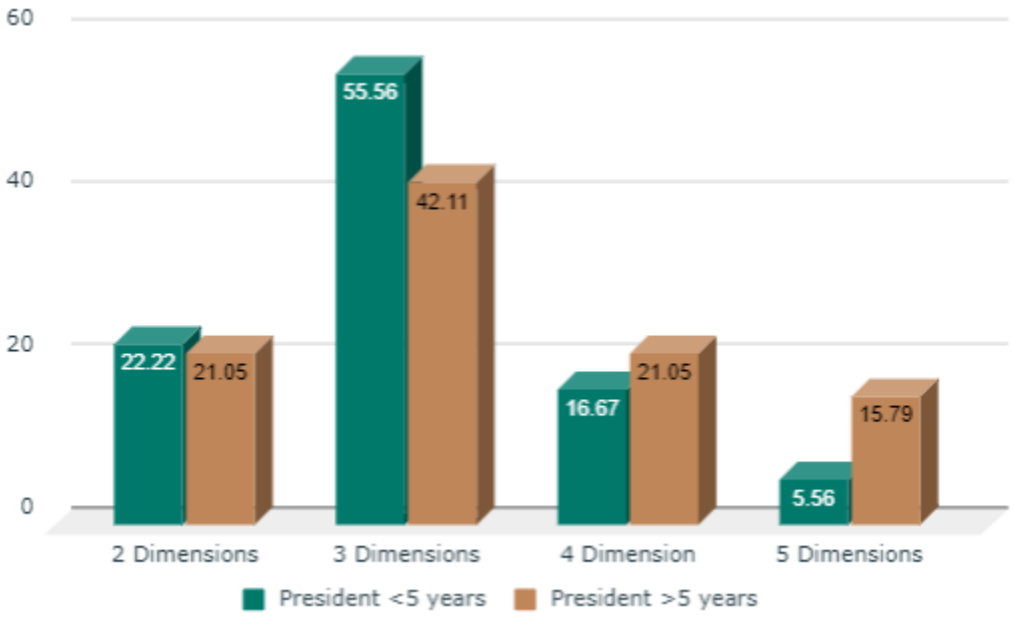
| Duration | Primary | Secondary | Total |
|---|---|---|---|
| President <5 years (n = 18) | 2.22 | 0.83 | 3.06 |
| President >5 years (n = 19) | 2.21 | 1.11 | 3.32 |
| Total (n = 37) | 2.22 | 0.97 | 3.19 |

New presidents utilized, on average, 3.06 dimensions of organizational behavior when addressing the critical incidents they discussed, with 55.56% of incidents requiring three dimensions and 22.23% resulting in the usage of four or more dimensions. New presidents also averaged 2.22 primarily utilized dimensions of organizational behavior and .83 secondarily utilized dimensions. In comparison, veteran presidents deployed 3.24 dimensions of organizational behavior on average with three dimensions used in 42.11%

of incidents and 36.84% of those incidents resulting in the usage of four or more dimensions (see Figure 11 below). Veteran presidents also averaged 2.21 primarily utilized dimensions of organizational behavior and 1.11 secondarily utilized dimensions.

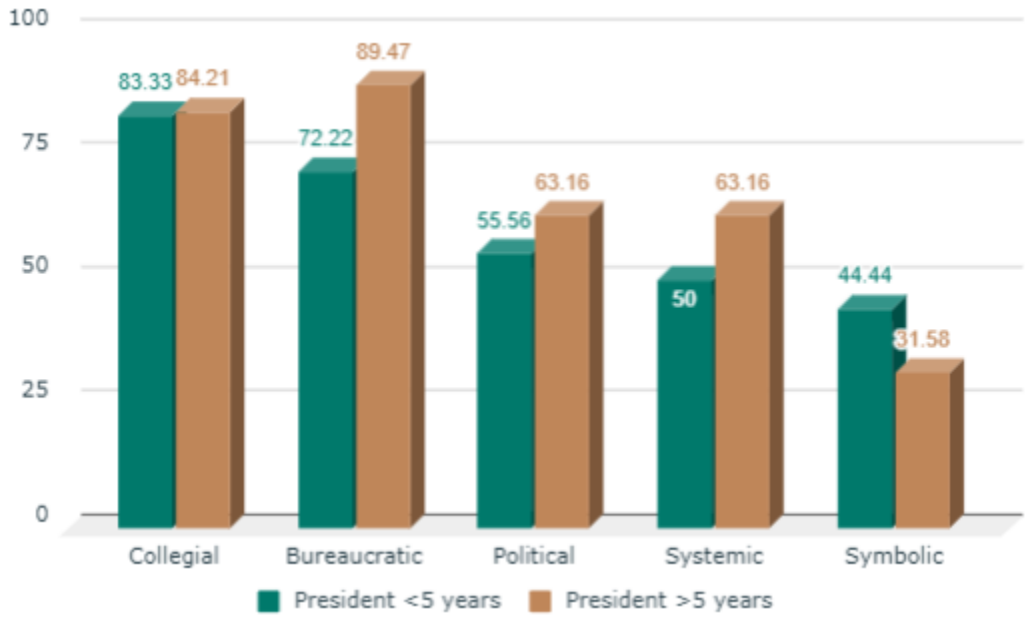
**Figure 9**

*Number of Total Dimensions of Organizational Behavior Utilized by Years as President*




For incidents managed by new presidents, the collegial dimension was employed in 83.33% of cases, with primary use in 61.1% and secondary in 22.22%. The bureaucratic dimension's overall use was 72.22%, with primary application in 50% and secondary in 22.22%. Political dimension usage was recorded in 55.56% of these incidents, including zero primary and 55.56% secondary applications. The systemic dimension was involved in 50% of the incidents, with a primary use rate of 33.33% and secondary at 16.67%. Finally, the symbolic dimension was utilized in 44.44% of incidents handled by new presidents, with 33.33% primary and 16.67% secondary applications.

For incidents dealt with by veteran presidents, the collegial dimension was employed in 84.21% of cases, with primary use in 68.42% and secondary in 15.79%. The bureaucratic dimension's overall use was 89.47%, with primary application in 57.89% and secondary in 31.58%. Political dimension usage was recorded in 63.16% of these incidents, including 42.11% primary and 21.05% secondary applications. The systemic dimension was involved in 63.16% of the incidents, with a primary use rate of 42.11% and secondary at 21.05%. Finally, the symbolic dimension was utilized in 31.58% of incidents managed by veteran presidents, with 10.53% primary and 21.05% secondary applications.

**Figure 10**

*Dimensions of Organizational Behavior Utilized by % of Critical Incidents by Years as President*