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**The Role of Presidential Digital Engagement in Fostering a Sense of Community  
Among Stakeholders**

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## **Abstract**

The role of a college president is unique and challenging given the demands of the position as well as the shifting higher education landscape. Research shows presidents are expected to fill many roles in a college community including fundraiser, financial steward, problem solver and cheerleader (Selingo et al., 2017; Trombley, 2007). As the United States becomes more reliant on digital communication, presidents are expected to conduct much of their essential engagement on platforms such as videos, websites, blogs and social media (Ahlquist, 2017). The purpose of this multiple-case study was to examine the unique role a president's digital engagement plays in fostering a sense of community among stakeholders. This multiple-case study included interviews with presidents who exemplified best practices at institutions nationwide as well as members of their senior leadership teams. A document analysis of digital communications helped to corroborate and add texture to the findings. Understanding the importance of presidential digital engagement has the potential to influence best practices at colleges and universities nationwide at a time when many institutions need to distinguish their unique offerings and cultures in light of a declining number of high school students in the United States (Will, 2016).

## **Introduction**

The digital revolution continues to change how Americans live with all facets of modern life increasingly transpiring through technology. This information age has dramatically affected communication with digital engagement consuming an individual's time and attention through e-mail, websites, social media and video. When the Pew Research Center began tracking social media adoption in 2005, just five percent of American adults used social media. In 2011 that figure had risen to half of all Americans, and 72% of the public used some type of social media by 2019. Young adults were among the earliest social media adopters and continue to use these sites at high levels (Pew Research Center, 2019). The public uses digital communication to gather and exchange information about a variety of topics, including higher education.

Colleges and universities are increasingly relying on digital engagement to recruit and retain students and engage parents and alumni (Clark, Fine, & Scheuer, 2016). Meeting the demand for content can be challenging as usage among stakeholders varies and can change frequently. One study of teenagers found the use of Facebook and Twitter to be declining while the use of Snapchat and Instagram is growing (Chegg & STATMATS, 2016). Yet other platforms may be more appropriate for audiences in other age groups. Institutions of higher education must meet the needs of a variety of stakeholders, including prospective undergraduate and graduate students, parents, alumni, donors and the public, and determine the appropriate platforms for engaging particular groups. Colleges and universities have limitless opportunities to reinforce brand personality and build community through effective digital engagement strategies (Clark, Fine, & Scheuer, 2016).

As digital engagement has become more popular among students, faculty, staff, alumni and donors, a college or university president must also communicate on the same platforms as those key constituents in order to build the strong relationships required for successful leadership. After interviewing 22 college and university presidents, Zaiontz (2015) concluded that being active on social media was not a requirement for a 21st century leader. Likely, that author would agree the role of social media in modern life has changed dramatically since that study was published, presenting an opportunity for further research. Overall, there is limited research on presidential engagement, and digital strategies must constantly be reconsidered as usage changes. This study sought to close a gap in the research and explore the role of presidential digital engagement in fostering a sense of community among stakeholders at a college or university.

### **Problem Statement**

The current environment in higher education presents a variety of challenges with government funding shrinking (Marcus, 2019) and a declining number of high school graduates (Will, 2016). Colleges and universities must highlight the unique ways they serve their students, alumni and communities as they seek not only to fill classrooms but to solicit donations crucial to financial growth. In the competitive atmosphere of higher education, college and universities develop marketing and communications plans to ensure admission goals are met (Clark, Fine, & Scheuer, 2016). Institutions are competing for a declining number of high school students due to changes in demographics (Will, 2016). Higher education marketing and communications plans rely heavily on digital engagement to create strong connections with prospective students as well as engagement with key stakeholders,



including families, alumni and donors. In one study, 90% of universities polled said social media is a much more important part of their marketing and communications efforts than the previous three years (Council for Advancement and Support of Education [CASE], 2016). Colleges and universities must be intentional with both the content and the frequency of digital communications to drive maximum engagement. Research into best digital engagement practices among college presidents found that some leaders are using social media to connect with stakeholders in novel ways and set best practices for the industry (Ahlquist, 2017). The goal of this digital engagement is relationship building and can also heighten a sense of transparency among constituents (Ahlquist, 2017).

Presidents of institutions of higher education have multiple demands on their time and must balance the needs of many members of the university or college community. One president described her role as “a symbol, politician, fundraiser, financial officer, problem-solver, and human resource manager” (Trombley, 2007, p. 14). To fulfill those demanding expectations, presidents must engage with students, parents, the public, politicians, donors, alumni, banks, faculty and staff, just to name a few constituencies. Statistics show those key stakeholders are communicating on digital platforms; in fact, one study found approximately three-quarters of the public uses more than one social media platform and the typical American uses three of these sites (Smith & Anderson, 2018). Just 55% of college and university presidents use social media and though that number may be higher than many Fortune 500 CEOs (Ahlquist, 2017), researchers found, “Many presidents miss opportunities to connect with current and prospective students as well as stakeholders and supporters” (Bowen et al., 2018, p. 11).

## **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this multiple-case study was to determine how presidential digital engagement contributes to the sense of community among stakeholders at institutions of higher education. This study will benefit college and university presidents as well as those who work in higher education marketing and communications, enrollment and advancement. The larger impact, however, will be on the sustainability of higher education at large. Colleges and universities need strong community engagement and participation to thrive (Weary, 2009). Engaged students, parents, alumni, donors, faculty and staff are all essential to creating a culture of academic excellence, philanthropy and longevity (Hayes, 2007; Meyers, 2014; Stoner, 2018). In this era of declining enrollments and the closures of struggling institutions (Busta, 2019), this study examined the importance of the role of the president in engaging the stakeholders needed to ensure an institution of higher education is sustainable in an increasingly digital world.

## **Background of Study**

### **Digital engagement in higher education**

Digital engagement has become an important way for institutions of higher education to interact with their stakeholders. Operations including marketing to prospective students and sharing news with alumni and donors take place on digital platforms. In fact, it is estimated 67% of high school seniors entering college researched schools using Facebook (EAB, 2016). Those students were hoping to get a glimpse at how they would fit in, what life on campus is like, get a sense of community, activities and social life (Hesel, 2013).

The research has shown some unexpected benefits to digital engagement in higher education. For example, engagement on social media has been shown to increase students' sense of connection to their college or university, which can lead to a higher grade point average and a higher likelihood of degree completion (Wilson & Gore, 2013). There is also some research indicating social media may help attract first-generation students; high school students, who lack financial resources or parental support, may find social media can help them access resources (Wohn, 2013).

In order for a university's digital engagement strategy to be effective, it must include a full complement of social media platforms to appeal to a range of users. More than 50% of high school seniors used social media platforms other than Facebook to research colleges (EAB, 2016). While studies show Snapchat and Instagram are growing in popularity with high school users (Chegg & STATMATS, 2016), colleges and universities must consider the variety of stakeholders when creating a brand personality for their digital engagement strategy. Marketing and communications departments must carefully and intentionally choose social media platforms to reach each audience of key stakeholders (Dooney, 2014). One study found that increasingly Facebook may be a better mode of communication with alumni, but not with prospective undergraduate students. Social media strategies must be considered in conjunction with other modern marketing tools including content marketing, viral marketing, and emotional marketing (Petru & Marejka, 2014). Higher education marketing teams must also stay ahead of trends to ensure they meet the changing needs of key constituents. Institutions of higher education report their use of Instagram rose from 54% in 2015 to 65% a year later. In addition, the use of Snapchat grew from five percent in 2015 to 15% in 2016 (CASE, 2016).

University marketing teams should also intentionally consider how frequently they should post on each platform to ensure user engagement. Research indicated the optimal number of posts for Twitter to be three tweets per day, for Facebook two posts per day, for LinkedIn one post per day, and for Instagram at least 1.5 per posts a day (Lee, 2015). Content must be planned carefully because short postings (e.g. short entertaining postings) do not receive high interactivity (Brech, 2017). The way in which constituencies engage with digital content is constantly evolving and institutions must evolve their strategies accordingly. Institutions of higher education must meet the needs of several stakeholders including prospective undergraduate and graduate students, parents, alumni, donors and the public. Universities and colleges must invest resources in social media communications to form high-quality relationships with their stakeholders. One group of researchers suggested it is preferable if students will follow a college or university on at least three social media sites to optimize the ability to form strong relationships (Clark, Fine, & Scheuer, 2017); that means universities must produce high-quality content frequently. Brand personality, which characterizes the brand as if it were a person, is becoming increasingly important on social media and can be a strategic differentiator in the crowded college market (Rutter, 2017). A university must determine the image it seeks to promote on social media and reinforce that image consistently. Various members of a university community can play essential roles in promoting the institution, including the college or university president.

### **Evolving role of a college president**

The role of a college or president in the modern age has become a complex one that far exceeds the traditional duties associated with leading an academic institution. A president may

be seen as a “symbol, politician, fundraiser, financial officer, problem solver, and human resource manager” (Trombley, 2007, p. 14). In a recent survey, presidents reported the top five areas that occupy their time include: budget/financial management, fundraising, managing a senior-level team, governing board relations and enrollment management (Gagliardi et al., 2017). The study revealed that one of the main frustrations for presidents is that others believe they are infinitely accessible through email and other forms of engagement (Gagliardi et al., 2017). In fact, one president described the position as largely external, while the provost handled internal and academic issues (Trombley, 2007).

In a provocative study comparing college presidents to football coaches, the authors noted the similarities and differences between presidents and chief executive officers of for-profit businesses. The authors stated, “Their primary role is to chart an aspirational vision for the future of the institution that will engage future students and past alumni” (Thomas & Van Horn, 2016, p. 907). However, unlike a CEO, the goals for a university president are not as simple as generating returns for shareholders. The lack of a profit goal makes it more challenging to evaluate the effectiveness of a college or university president (Thomas & Van Horn, 2016), and therefore, presidents may have greater leeway when it comes to setting an agenda for the university. Leaders at institutions of higher education must also juggle the demands of a board of trustees, faculty, students and alumni (Thomas & Van Horn, 2016). It is highly unlikely the president will have goals and preferences that align with those of all of their constituencies. Adding to this challenging array of duties is the pressure for a president to be a master communicator across a rapidly expanding digital landscape, which includes video presentations as well as social media.

### **College presidents and digital engagement**

College and university presidents interact with numerous stakeholders who have expectations about engagement with their leader, including the accessibility, frequency and speed of digital communication. Everything a president says or writes is viewed as representing the institution to the public. One president warned, “Boards should help presidents understand that their every utterance is for public consumption and will likely be viewed as a formal statement reflecting institutional policy or philosophy” (Trombley, 2007, p. 16).

The news media have documented cases of university and college presidents seemingly unable to respond effectively to a crisis that unfolds rapidly in this digital age. Leaders struggle to react in an era that allows for little time to respond to those unwilling to forgive a mistake (Lee, 2016). In a recent case at a New England college, a president publicly expressed surprise that activism had spread so quickly on his campus through e-mail and social media. The president acknowledged the experience was made more challenging by the fact that he does not engage on social media platforms (Fernandes, 2019). Presidents are expected to be informed about what is happening on campus and respond appropriately and swiftly. If a president does not respond rapidly, voices on social media can dominate the perception of the incident and the president’s response can be mischaracterized (Gardner, 2016). Despite the need for presidents to issue a rapid statement, one president said, however, words must be chosen carefully even in time-sensitive situations. Getting a variety of perspectives on a message prior to deploying it may help decrease the chances of a president mishandling the response (Gardner, 2016).

Developing an authentic or genuine voice through digital engagement also can be a challenge for presidents. When trying to connect with a younger audience, it is easy to appear as if the president is trying too hard to be hip or irreverent. The style of communication and the “voice” must be determined by the needs of specific audiences rather than by university policy (Dooney, 2014). As institutions of higher education encourage user-generated content from prospective and current students and alumni, it must allow conversations to develop naturally; the needs of the audience are more important than the university’s branding strategy (Dooney, 2014). Presidents play an important role in exemplifying the brand through their own unique digital engagement.

Some presidents of historically black institutions have used social media to increase engagement among prospective and current students (Harris, 2018). These presidents reported that their interaction on social media can help recruit students to the institution. One president argued that if students are looking down at their phones on social media, then a college or university president must engage them there as well (Harris, 2018). Steve D. Mobley, an assistant professor of higher education at the University of Alabama at Tuscaloosa, argued, “I don't know what better recruitment tool you have than the president of your prospective university engaging you in social media” (Harris, 2018).

That type of engagement, however, does not have to be limited to prospective or current students. Other university stakeholders expect similar outreach including alumni and donors. Just as it is essential that an institution of higher education have a clear and consistent brand in its digital engagement so must a president. Presidents should represent themselves authentically on social media posts and in other forms of digital engagement. President Michael Sorrell of Paul Quinn College in Dallas argued, “The worst thing you can do is use social media to create a

persona that isn't in fact yours" (Harris, 2018). The presidential persona is inextricably linked to the overall brand of the academic institution and is essential to maintaining strong bonds with key stakeholders.

### **Sense of Community Theory**

The theoretical framework used to ground this study is the sense of community theory (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). According to Grant and Osanloo (2014), a theoretical framework guides the researcher in examining an issue; it also serves as a guide in designing this research study, including data collection and analysis.

The authors of the sense of community theory proposed a four-criterion definition. The first element is membership; in this case the connection that various stakeholders feel toward the institution of higher education. Members feel a sense of belonging and relatedness to other students, faculty, staff and alumni. The second element is influence; stakeholders have a sense that they matter and make a difference to the college or university. The third element is reinforcement; the sense that community members' needs will be met by the institution because they are a valued part of the college or university. The last criteria is a shared emotional connection; that members share history, common places, time together and similar experiences (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). McMillan and Chavis (1986) wrote, "Sense of community is a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together" (p. 9).

The theory has been cited thousands of times by researchers primarily in the field of psychology. It has been used in studies that examine students' need for belonging at school and



in both urban and rural residential areas. It has also been used in a study of the social influence of brand community which examined European car clubs. In higher education specifically, the sense of community theory has been cited as part of studies examining the connection students experience in traditional and fully online graduate courses. There is, in fact, a 20-item Classroom Community Scale, which measures sense of community in a learning environment (Rovai, 2002).

The sense of community theory is relevant to this study because it validates the need to strengthen the connectivity of stakeholders to an institution. The theory grounds the study because it provided compelling evidence that colleges and universities must cultivate a sense of community and offered four criteria that guided the researcher in designing interview questions. This study sought to determine the importance of presidential digital engagement in fostering the sense of community among stakeholders at institutions of higher education. The theory not only provided evidence of the need for engagement, but also offered a framework for the researcher to determine if the criteria as defined by McMillan and Chavis (1986) are being met by the digital engagement of college and university presidents who are included in this multiple-case study.

### **Research Question**

This study seeks to answer the following research question: How do college presidents leverage digital engagement to foster a sense of community among stakeholders?

### **Definition of Terms**

Brand Personality

Brand personality is a set of human characteristics that are attributed to a brand name. An effective brand increases its value by having a consistent set of traits that a specific consumer segment enjoys (Aaker, 1997).

Digital Engagement	Digital engagement is the process of connecting with stakeholders throughout their journey with an institution. It requires creating relevant communications delivered at the right time, in the right manner to key stakeholders. Ideally this is accomplished across a number of platforms (Moreno, 2017).
Facebook	With more than one billion users, Facebook is the world's largest social network.
Instagram	Instagram is a photo-sharing application and service that allows users to share pictures and videos either publicly or privately. It has 700 million monthly users.
LinkedIn	LinkedIn is a business- and employment-oriented social networking service with 500 million-plus users.
Presidential Digital Engagement	Presidential digital engagement refers to relevant communications delivered to key stakeholders across a number of channels including video, social media, websites and blogs (Moreno, 2017).
Sense of Community Theory	The sense of community theory proposes four criteria that define "belonging." They include membership, influence, reinforcement, and shared emotional connection (McMillan & Chavis, 1986).
Snapchat	Snapchat is both a messaging platform and a social network. It exists only as a mobile app. Users can send friends photos or short videos. There are approximately 160 million daily users.
Social Media	Forms of electronic communication where users create online communities to share information, ideas, messages and other content including videos.

Twitter

Twitter is an online news and social networking service where users post and interact with messages, "tweets", restricted to 280 characters.

## **Methodology**

### **Research Design**

This multiple-case study included interviews with presidents and senior leaders at four institutions of higher education. These leaders have been recognized as college presidents to follow on social media (Ahlquist, 2017) due to their dynamic presence on popular platforms. Their interviews offered insight into best practices, and sought to determine how a president's digital engagement fosters a sense of community with stakeholders using the criteria outlined by McMillan and Chavis (1986). To best determine the impact of a president's digital engagement, the researcher also interviewed senior leaders of three essential divisions including enrollment management, marketing and communications, and advancement at each of the institutions. A multiple-case study was appropriate for this research question because the researcher sought to explain why something is important, a key factor when determining the relevancy of a case study (Yin, 2018).

This study also included a document analysis of presidential social media, community-wide emails, and videos over an academic semester to corroborate the findings in the interviews as well as provide texture to the research. Patton (2001) argued that triangulation strengthens a study by combining several kinds of methods or data. The two forms of collection enhanced the trustworthiness of the data.

## **Participants**

This researcher interviewed presidents at four institutions of higher education who have been recognized for “digital leadership” (Ahlquist, 2017). To best gauge the impact the presidents have on fostering a sense of community, the researcher also interviewed the senior leader of marketing and communications, as well as the leaders of enrollment management and advancement at each institution. These three additional senior leaders provided insight into the role presidential digital engagement plays in fostering a sense of community in essential divisions at a higher education institution including: marketing and communications, enrollment management, and advancement.

## **Instrumentation**

The researcher used a participant questionnaire to determine eligibility and gather basic information. An interview guide was created and used to provide a framework for the researcher to ensure questions were fair, consistent and evoked information tied to the research question and theory; the interview guide was created around the four domains of the sense of community theory (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). The researcher used purposeful sampling, which involved identifying and selecting individuals who are knowledgeable about or experienced with a phenomenon of interest (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Questions focused on how the president approaches digital engagement and what type of communication results in higher levels of stakeholder engagement. The questions utilized the funnel technique and were kept to a reasonable length to ensure the interview could be conducted in the amount of time most presidents could make available to this researcher. Roller and Lavrakas (2015) described the funnel technique as starting an interview broadly and progressively narrowing the topic to the

items of highest importance to the research question. Caution was taken to ensure the sequence of questions was unbiased.

A document analysis guide was created so digital posts could be coded into themes and types of engagement. According to Bowen (2009), document analysis helps to create meaning around an assessment topic. Each post was coded into themes such as thought leadership, crisis, and transparency, as well as each of the tenets of the sense of community theory (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). The engagement was tracked over the course of an academic semester based on the number of likes, shares or reposts and comments. Examples of comments from stakeholders were recorded to add texture to the research.

### **Pilot Test.**

The interview guide was tested on two higher education leaders, including a president and enrollment management vice president not involved in this study, to check for appropriate length, clarity of questions and sequencing. The test group provided feedback, and adjustments to the questions were made based on their responses to word choice, definitions and sequencing.

### **Data Collection**

The researcher interviewed the college presidents and senior leaders via Zoom conferencing. The conversations were recorded and transcribed by a third party; the transcription company signed a non-disclosure agreement. The participants signed a consent agreement to participate in the study, and the interview responses were coded to identify patterns of response.

A document analysis guide was used to examine digital engagement posts. These posts were coded into themes and types of engagement, such as thought leadership, crisis and

transparency, as well as each of the tenets of the sense of community theory (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). The engagement was tracked based on the number of likes, shares or reposts and comments. The coding system helped identify patterns and trends. Comments on posts were transcribed to add texture to the research. Data collected was confidential and pseudonyms were used.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The researcher followed the principles of ethics when performing interviews. In order to reduce the risk of harm to the participants, the researcher ensured the participants signed human subject consent forms to inform them about the research and explain the benefits and risks to participating (Office for Human Research Protections, 2019). Additionally, the researcher ensured that participant information and data remained confidential by using pseudonyms and a password-protected computer; any printed material was kept in a locked office. The researcher required a non-disclosure agreement from the transcription provider. The researcher explained to participants that at any point they may choose to no longer assist in the research (Office for Human Research Protections, 2019).

### **Data Analysis**

Qualitative data obtained from the interviews was transcribed and analyzed to identify key themes. Once these themes emerged, the researcher began a narrative using the techniques developed by Miles and Huberman (1994). They argued that qualitative data are sources of rich description and can explain processes. Miles and Huberman (1994) recommend three types of analysis happening at the same time including the following: data reduction, data display and

conclusion-drawing/verification. The researcher developed summaries of each interview before creating the codebook. The researcher entered the interview transcripts and documents into the NVivo qualitative data software program for a comprehensive process of coding themes. The number of themes reduced as key themes emerged; the central themes helped to identify the findings.

A document analysis was performed on presidential digital posts and messaging publicly available at the four institutions of higher education. Document analysis requires that data be reviewed and interpreted in order to gather meaning, gain understanding, and develop knowledge (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The study focused on how presidents foster a sense of community through digital engagement; the document analysis was conducted in order to identify themes, patterns and categories. Bowen (2009) explained that document analysis is a process of skimming the material, reading it more thoroughly and then interpreting the material

### **Limitations/Delimitations**

This proposed multiple-case study presented several limitations that are beyond the control of the researcher. These are the measures that were implemented to offset the influence of the limitations.

- The researcher is herself involved in overseeing a university's digital engagement efforts.

This study sought to overcome any potential bias by having a clear coding system to provide an unbiased evaluation of the presidents' digital posts. The interview guide was piloted (Creswell, 2014) to uncover any potential bias in the questions. The researcher

also maintained a clear audit trail, conducted member checking, and corroborated interview findings with document analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

- The institutions in this proposed research were chosen by an objective measure (highlighted in research about college presidents' excellence in social media engagement); however, each institution is different. A participant questionnaire was, therefore, developed and piloted to offset the potential influence of diverse institutional budgets and sizes on the definition of success.
- There are always unforeseeable external forces that can influence the responses of participants. Some of these could be the general culture of the times including political and economic shifts as well as issues facing higher education. These potential influences were determined by developing questions for the screening survey that address these concerns.
- Budget variances, geography and type of institution may influence the size and structure of the staff at each college or university and the type of social engagement, which will be clarified during the initial screening survey.
- There is a small sample size, so the findings are internally generalizable.

There are several delimitations in this proposed research:

- The colleges and universities chosen for this study were identified based upon their recognition by researcher Dr. Josie Ahlquist (2017) who compiled lists of higher education presidents to follow on popular social media platforms.



- To narrow the scope, this researcher focused on private institutions with undergraduate enrollments smaller than 10,000 students.
- The institutions are located in the United States.
- At each institution, key personnel were interviewed including the presidents, as well as the vice presidents or senior leaders of marketing and communications, enrollment management, and advancement.

### **Resulting Actions**

The patterns indicate that certain types of presidential digital engagement increase a sense of community; this finding may influence further research and best practices for institutions of higher education. Digital engagement is becoming an increasingly important means of admission recruiting, public outreach, as well as alumni and donor engagement (Clark, Fine, & Scheuer, 2016). Administrators in many divisions will greatly benefit from insight into the most effective types of presidential digital communications. Both the role of a president and the communications field are changing rapidly and there is little time for reflection and research for those actively running a university or producing content to advance the mission. This research should enhance this important work and provide evidence for the development of best practices in the future.

### **Summary**

The importance of presidential digital engagement in higher education is growing exponentially. Prior research has focused on types of engagement and highlighted presidents who amass large followings. However, there is a gap in the research regarding how presidential digital engagement fosters a sense of community with key stakeholders. This study is timely

because the number of high school seniors is declining, which means institutions must sharpen their messaging in an increasingly competitive environment. This research will add to the knowledge of best practices and determine which strategies will be most effective in the future; it will also explain why presidential digital engagement should be an important priority for senior leadership. This research will help guide higher education presidents and leaders to best practices in an ever-changing digital landscape.

## CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

The digital age has transformed nearly every aspect of modern life in the United States including how higher education conducts business and engages with key stakeholders. A recent survey found 90% of U.S. households contain at least one electronic device such as a smartphone, computer, tablet or streaming media device. The average household contains five electronic devices and nearly one-in-five households are “hyper-connected”, which means they have 10 or more of these devices (Pew Research Center, 2017). Perhaps most relevant to higher education is that 96% of adults ages 18 to 29 years old live in a household with at least one smart phone (Pew Research Center, 2017). The majority of college and university students fit into that age group with just over 12 million students under the age of 25 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018).

Given the widespread usage of digital devices, Moreno (2017) argued institutions of higher education must engage with stakeholders on those devices by delivering relevant messaging at the appropriate time, in the appropriate manner. Digital engagement includes social media, emails, blogs, and videos to communicate with stakeholders throughout their journey with an institution (Moreno, 2017). Social media is an increasingly popular way for colleges and universities to engage with stakeholders including prospective and current students, parents, alumni, donors and the public (Ruffalo Noel Levitz, 2017; Stoner, 2018). Facebook remains one of the most used social media platforms among adults in the United States; nearly 70% of U.S. adults report they have used the site (Perrin & Anderson, 2019). Seventy-three percent of adults report using YouTube, making it the only other online platform that has a similar reach to

Facebook. Other online platforms, including Instagram and Snapchat, are favored among young adults 18-to 24-years old (Perrin & Anderson, 2019).

Furthermore, the popular media have written stories about higher education leaders who were unable to anticipate a crisis or controversy that begins or escalates on digital platforms. For example, a New England college president acknowledged that he does not often use social media and was caught off guard by a recent spread of student activism regarding a sexual misconduct allegation that spread rapidly through email and social media (Fernandes, 2019). Research shows just 55% of college and university presidents use social media and though that number may be higher than many Fortune 500 CEOs (Ahlquist, 2017), “Many presidents miss opportunities to connect with current and prospective students as well as stakeholders and supporters” (Bowen et al., 2018, p. 11).

There is limited research on digital engagement among college presidents, and by its nature this type of research must be updated frequently as technology usage is constantly changing. There is also a gap in the research and a need to explore the role of presidential digital engagement in fostering a sense of community in higher education. That sense of community among stakeholders has historically been important to colleges and universities (Fitzgerald et al., 2015), and may offer a compelling reason as to why college presidents should have a robust digital engagement strategy. In an era of declining enrollments and campus closures (Busta, 2019), this study explored how universities have used presidential digital engagement to foster a sense of community among stakeholders who are vital to an institution’s success.

This chapter contains a review of the literature related to digital engagement in higher education, the changing role of a college president, digital engagement and college presidents, as well as the sense of community theory, which grounds this multiple-case study.

### **Digital Engagement in Higher Education**

Digital engagement, for the purpose of this study, is defined as the process of connecting with stakeholders throughout their journey with an institution (Moreno, 2017). It requires creating relevant communications delivered at the right time, in the right manner to key stakeholders; ideally this is accomplished across a number of platforms (Moreno, 2017). Messaging can be delivered digitally via email, videos, blogs, and social media. Social media, in particular, has become a huge part of American life with some 223 million people participating in this form of communication (Edison Research, 2019). In a recent survey, nearly every higher education institution reported using multiple social media channels to reach stakeholders where they prefer most (Stoner, 2018).

According to Edison Research (2019), Facebook remains the most-used social media network in the U.S. among those aged 12 and older followed by Instagram, Pinterest, Snapchat, LinkedIn, Twitter and WhatsApp, respectively. Video sharing website YouTube is also an important digital platform, nearly as big as Facebook, with over 1.8 billion monthly users (Gilbert, 2018). In fact, 51% of YouTube users say they visit the site every day, a slight increase from the 45% in 2018 (Perrin & Anderson, 2019).

It is important to note, by its nature social media platforms and usage change frequently. Despite being the most-used social media network in the U.S., research showed among

Americans 12 to 34 years old, Facebook usage has declined from 79% in 2017 to 62% in 2019. Twitter and Pinterest have also seen a decline in usage among younger Americans, to 29% and 31% respectively. Similarly, LinkedIn usage is down from 23% to 21%. In the 12-to-34 year old age group, Snapchat has stayed steady in that same two-year time period at around 62% usage. The only social network seeing growth among younger Americans is Instagram, which is up to 66% from 64% two years ago (Edison Research, 2019). It is important for colleges and universities to be aware of social media usage trends in order to optimally select which platform to use for their targeted audience.

For the traditionally aged undergraduate population, universities and colleges also must extend messaging to the parents as well (Ruffalo Noel Levitz, 2017); the research indicates that the most popular platform would be LinkedIn followed by Facebook, Pinterest, WhatsApp and Twitter. Instagram and Snapchat are less popular among adults 35 and older (Edison Research, 2019). Facebook use is the most common across a range of age groups, with 68% of those ages 50 to 64 and nearly half of those 65 and older saying they use the site (Perrin & Anderson, 2019).

Digital engagement is important in higher education simply because it is the way nearly everyone communicates in modern society. Universities and colleges use digital engagement to email community members about everything from routine events to emergencies. Digital engagement is also an important way to get feedback from stakeholders with 83% of colleges and universities using analytics for “social listening” (Stoner, 2018). One study recommended that all institutions of higher education should be monitoring online “buzz” among stakeholders (Barnes & Lescault, 2013). Monitoring can provide information about potential problems as well

as provide important news about students, alumni or faculty (Barnes & Lescault, 2013). Digital engagement is also used in the recruitment of students, maintaining strong connections with alumni and donors, as well as overall institutional brand awareness and reinforcement.

Institutions of higher education are complex organizations with many stakeholders that can each be considered essential in terms of recruiting and retaining students, recruiting and retaining faculty and staff, raising financial support beyond tuition, and ensuring strong community support for the college or university mission (Weary, 2009).

### **Enrollment management**

Institutions of higher education begin the process of digital engagement with potential traditional-aged undergraduate students when they are sophomores or juniors in high school. According to Selingo (2017), in the past institutions of higher education purchased lists of names of high school students and sent them a packet of information through the mail. Today the marketing to students never stops with most institutions employing a strategy of ongoing digital communications touchpoints throughout the admissions cycle (Selingo, 2017). When students take their first standardized college admissions test in high school, they are asked a series of questions about their grades, family income, intended major, outside interests and types of colleges they prefer. Answers to those questions are sold to colleges and scholarship services setting off a non-stop digital engagement effort that a university undertakes to yield a first-year class (Selingo, 2017). More than 70% of high school students say they prefer receiving email information from college admission offices over other forms of digital communications, interestingly, overall they still prefer to receive the traditional printed brochures (Chegg &

Stamats, 2016). From 2011 to 2017, the number of students who engaged in college searches and applications on their mobile devices increased by 61% (Olsen, 2018).

Students actively seek out this digital engagement and conduct their own college searches largely through websites and social media. Admissions experts say colleges and universities must provide information about their offerings to traditional-aged students and families across a variety of platforms including websites, email, videos and printed brochures (Ruffalo Noel Levitt, 2017). Facebook is the number one social media source for high school students to learn about a college with 67% of seniors reporting they researched schools using the social networking platform (EAB, 2016). Those students were hoping to get a glimpse at how they would fit in, what life on campus would be like, as well as get a sense of community, including activities and social life (Hesel, 2013). Instagram and Snapchat, which are used by 67% and 62% of 18 to 29 year olds, respectively, are also important social media platforms for college admissions offices to reach prospective students. Prospective students aged 18 to 24 are much more likely than those ages 25 to 29 to say they use Snapchat (73% vs. 47%) and Instagram (75% vs. 57%) (Perrin & Anderson, 2019), a defining line of social media usage among traditional undergraduate age students and those who may be considered non-traditional or potential graduate students. Parents are highly influential in the college search for traditional-age students with students citing parents as the most important voice in their college search (Olsen, 2018). Colleges and universities with online offerings compete with institutions across the United States and must spend resources to differentiate themselves from offerings from for-profit schools (Dimeo, 2017). Digital campaigns perform best in this space, with social media marketing a large focus of recruitment efforts (Dimeo, 2017). Social media advertising is also



considered important to reaching the multiple audiences who are essential to community college enrollment marketing (Toohey, 2018).

Research also suggested that social media may help attract first-generation students; high school students who lack financial resources or parental support may find social media can help them access resources (Wohn, 2013). In fact, engagement on social media has been shown to increase students' sense of connection to their college or university, which can lead to a higher grade point average and a higher likelihood of degree completion (Wilson & Gore, 2013). Social media can promote student satisfaction and engagement (Manago et al., 2012; Valenzuela et al., 2009); expand social networks (Ellison et al., 2007); and add to students' sense of belonging to an institution (Strayhorn, 2012). Some institutions are experimenting with augmented reality communications to bring virtual content to life when users point their smartphones at a marker. State University of New York at Orange has been using augmented reality for scavenger hunts so newly admitted students can learn more information about key support services including financial aid and career development in an effort to improve retention rates (Hope, 2019).

### **Advancement**

Alumni affairs and institutional advancement also rely on digital engagement to keep alumni connected to the college or university and promote a culture of philanthropy. Institutions of higher education seek to create robust social networks of graduates to strengthen alumni engagement, increase volunteerism and promote giving (Meyers, 2014). Historically, universities have relied on alumni regional calls, phone-a-thons and emails; online communities now offer a faster and less expensive way to build crucial engagement opportunities (Meyers, 2014).

According to Stoner (2018), email remains an important way to connect with many alumni constituents except possibly Generation Z, those born from 1995 to 2010. Video engagement is particularly popular among university advancement divisions, with 85% reporting using video to communicate with stakeholders (Stoner, 2018). The most popular social networking sites for advancement stakeholder engagement include Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn, with nearly all respondents in a recent survey reporting that Facebook was the most successful for fundraising (Stoner, 2018).

The Council for Advancement and Support of Education (CASE) recently recognized the University of California at Los Angeles for best practices in alumni relations for its unique digital engagement effort. The campaign was designed around graduates who cannot travel to campus for a typical alumni day. UCLA's first online alumni day brought the event to graduates virtually with rare looks at places on campus through online tours, quizzes, interaction with faculty experts in real-time discussions, and a chance to reconnect with fellow alumni via live chat (CASE, 2019).

Another important trend emerging is the development of metrics to gauge the success of institutions in engaging stakeholders. Some alumni offices use "net promoter scores" (NPS), in alignment with many businesses, to determine the loyalty that exists between a business and its customer (Stoner, 2018). This type of measurement seeks to ensure alumni offices are targeting communications to those who are actively responding to them. According to Stoner (2018), 26% of higher education institutions are assigning scores to both alumni and donors.

## **Marketing and communications**

Colleges and universities in the United States have been marketing their unique offerings since the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Bok, 2003). For more than a decade, institutions have used marketing to compete for a decreasing pool of students at a time of declining support from government agencies (Newman et al., 2004). Kotler (1979) advocated for universities to develop a marketing plan that considers demand, resources and mission to determine how their institution fits in the marketplace. Nearly 30 years later, Hayes (2007) defined successful higher education marketing as “effectively communicating the same message across all divisions of the school” (p. 930). Today that finding might be amended to say “across all platforms” as well. Research shows that brand identity is shaped by four independent variables including reputation, personality, performance and relationship (Bosch et al., 2006) and is increasingly important. Tolbert (2014) said the lack of clear brand personality is a missed opportunity, but Hayes (2007) bleakly predicted the creation of a distinct identity is crucial to an institution’s survival.

Today much of an institution’s marketing takes place on digital platforms. Initially much of a university’s digital marketing took place on its website, which remains an essential part of the overall strategy. Opoku et al. (2008) correctly predicted that a website would be “a strong competitive weapon” (p. 127). However, the website is just one part of an institution’s overall digital marketing plan. A recent survey revealed that 68% of social media executives in higher education around the world believe social media is a strategic focus; 64% agreed it is important to a college’s strategic planning and for fulfilling an institution’s mission (Hootsuite, 2018). Video has become increasingly popular, with 75% of institutions reporting using video to build brand awareness (Stoner, 2018). Lovejoy and Saxton (2012) researched non-profits’ use of

Twitter and discovered three main purposes, including information, action and community.

Information referred to the dissemination of key information with the intention it will be shared by users. Action referred to the call to action, which in higher education might include attending an open house or requesting more information. Finally, the community function referred to the use of social media to stimulate conversations among users (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012). The community function also involves the use of digital engagement to encourage the participation of members around what Carpenter et al. (2016) refer to as the “passion points” of an institution.

Colleges and universities, including their presidents, can use social media to share information around those “passion points” to demonstrate their ties with members of their community, a concept that pre-dates social media with the word-of-mouth research of Brown and Reingen in 1987. More recently, Carpenter et al. (2016) argued the power of word-of-mouth on consumer’s behavior can be evolved to the study of social media as an influence on consumer behavior. To use the lingo of social media, in higher education the president has the ability to be the ultimate influencer and ambassador for a college or university’s brand with the potential to impact the behaviors of prospective and current students, donors and community members.

### **Evolving role of a college president**

In colonial times, college presidents oversaw nearly all administrative duties including fundraising, the registrar, bursar, librarians, as well as student discipline (Aspen Institute, 2017). In later years, the role of the president evolved to focus more on the academic side of the operation, including teaching and research; a president in the early 1900s was likely chosen from among the faculty (Aspen Institute, 2017). With the introduction of the GI Bill, higher education

expanded after World War II and the presidency became a more outward-facing role (Selingo et al., 2017).

Presidents must juggle the needs of a growing list of increasingly vocal stakeholders including: policymakers, local communities, faculty, alumni and students (Kerr, 1963). Still, a president must provide leadership in safeguarding the institution's academic integrity and its reputation (Eckel & Kezar, 2016). A report entitled *Pathways to the University Presidency* (Selingo et al., 2017), described the modern president as a multidisciplinarian who must navigate across the disciplines, institutions and form outside partnerships. College presidents are required to balance the demands of often-competing constituencies including the board of trustees, faculty, students, alumni and the community at large (Thomas & Van Horn, 2016).

One former president said in many ways the job, though complex, has a set of duties that has remained unchanged over the decades, including: strategic vision and priority-setting; executive decision-making; engaging with the board, faculty, staff, students and alumni; reaching out to the media and business leaders; budget oversight; and overseeing the operations of a large organization (Ikenberry, 2010). Trombley (2007) described a college president as a “symbol, politician, fundraiser, financial officer, problem-solver, and human resource manager” (p. 14). More recent research found that presidents today must also balance demands for access, affordability and student success, along with prestige and rankings, and financial growth and stability (Aspen Institute, 2017). To be successful in meeting those expectations, Ikenberry (2010) argued that presidential leadership has three essential functions, including the ability to articulate the mission, to be the voice and face of the institution, and to lead change. The need to

lead transformational change has remained an important role for a college president for over a century (Ikenberry, 2010).

The Aspen Institute College Excellence Program convened a Task Force on the Future of the College Presidency in 2017, which outlined several challenges including turnover of presidents who are retiring, a smaller pool of people interested in the presidency who hold positions that usually precede the presidency, and a lack of systems in place to prepare diverse and non-traditional candidates for the presidency (Aspen Institute, 2017).

Currently, the typical American college or university president is a white male who spends a little over six years on the job. The average age of a president is 62 years old, a decade older than 30 years ago when information for the American College President Study was first collected (Gagliardi et al., 2017). The percentage of women college presidents is approximately 30% and minorities 17% (Gagliardi et al., 2017). The career trajectory for the typical college or university president has also changed in recent years. The 2017 report “Pathways to the University Presidency” found that while the provost’s office used to be the stepping stone to the presidency, it is becoming more common for deans to move straight to the top job (Selingo et al., 2017). Additionally, the trend of hiring leaders from outside higher education declined from 20% in 2011 to 15% in 2016 (Gagliardi et al., 2017). Presidents today also spend less time in the position than in the past; the average tenure was 6.5 years in 2016 down from 8.5 years a decade earlier (Gagliardi et al., 2017).

The role of a college president is uniquely challenging. The 2017 report “Pathways to the University Presidency” found that two-thirds of presidents reported having coaching or mentors to prepare them for the role, yet only one-third received support to succeed once they assumed

the job (Selingo et al., 2017). There are well-known programs, including the Harvard Graduate School of Education Seminar for New Presidents, which covers a variety of topics recognizing that presidents do not have the luxury of learning on the job (Harvard University, 2019). The Council of Independent Colleges also offers a new presidents program with sessions on financial expertise, enrollment and marketing, board management, advancement and strategic leadership (Council of Independent Colleges, 2019).

Eckel and Kezar (2016) found that effective presidents are able to lead efforts such as strategic plans and promoting institutional goals through engaging stakeholders, including faculty, staff, students, alumni and community members. By shaping the messaging, presidents are able to have influence across a number of stakeholders (Eckel & Kezar, 2016). College presidents must be comfortable speaking the language of business, philanthropy and government, as well as academia, so they can explain the institution's vision to a variety of key stakeholders (Eddy, 2010). However, in this digital age, the flow of communication is unrelenting and presidents can struggle to keep up with a world that demands they stay connected (Ikenberry, 2010). "Successful presidents are essential to dynamic, relevant, and robust colleges and universities" (Eckel & Kezar, 2016, p. 161). Increasingly, that success requires dynamic, relevant, and robust presidential engagement across a variety of digital platforms.

### **College Presidents and Digital Engagement**

There are several reasons why digital engagement is becoming a more important part of a college president's complex job. Ahlquist (2017) defined digital leadership as an intentional approach connecting technology to leadership in an effort to improve a collegiate community (Ahlquist, 2017). Digital engagement is an essential part of creating a sense of community by

connecting presidents to stakeholders and providing a sense of transparency about their leadership (Ahlquist, 2017).

Researcher Daniel Zaiontz interviewed 22 college presidents in the United States and Canada and created a guide to best social media practices published in 2015. His research found that many higher education leaders use social media to engage with key stakeholders including prospective and current students, faculty, alumni, government leaders, news media and donors (Zaiontz, 2015). Zaiontz (2015) found the goals of presidential social media included the following: supporting strategic priorities, enhancing stakeholder relationships, altering institutional perceptions, increasing institutional morale, and developing a platform for thought leadership. Many presidents reported that social media allowed them to stay connected to the issues most important to community members, especially when traveling or otherwise unable to connect with stakeholders in person (Zaiontz, 2015).

Zaiontz (2015) found presidents utilized a number of strategies to generate content for digital engagement. Some leaders used ghostwriters, others a hybrid model relying on staff members to help with responding to stakeholders, and finally, many presidents handled their social media independently. Interestingly, Zaiontz (2015) examined the types of styles that could describe a president's digital engagement including the customer servant, the institutional promoter, the socially inconsistent (intermittently posting), the oversharing non-strategist, and the socially active strategist. His research offered many insights into best practices, but ultimately concluded that at the time presence on social media was not a requirement for a college or university president (Zaiontz, 2015). He argued that if social media was not consistent



with a president's style or if a busy schedule did not allow participation, it was acceptable to forgo this type of engagement.

However, a more recent report published by the Aspen Institute entitled, "Future of the College Presidency" (2017) revealed that the prevalence of social media requires that a president possess a higher level of communication skills and heightened sophistication in public relations. Mack and Stoner (2014) found that 46% of higher education presidents used social media in their official roles; four years later that number had risen to 51% (Stoner, 2018). College and university presidents post on Twitter most frequently, 63%, followed by 17% on Facebook and 15% on Instagram. Blogging has declined in popularity and is no longer popular enough to be included in the CASE survey (Stoner, 2018). Forty three percent of presidents reported managing their own Instagram rather than delegating to other staff member; 41% manage their own Twitter accounts (Stoner, 2018).

The Aspen Institute report (2017) found that presidents in the future may require skills from outside of higher education to lead organizational and community change, and to use new technologies to create value for both students and the communities they serve. The report also recommended that presidents have communication skills that evolve with new and changing norms on social media. Ultimately the report found while good communication is important, framing of vision and priorities is much more important given the challenges of the presidency today (Aspen Institute, 2017).

Among the challenges presidents face is the instantaneous communication digital platforms create; presidents must be prepared to handle a campus crisis and use a range of tools to ensure a comprehensive response. Effective presidents not only have to make decisions

quickly, but to communicate them in ways that will maintain a president's and the institution's credibility (Brennan & Stern, 2017). If a leader fails to handle a crisis well, it can lead to a loss of confidence in the presidency as well as serious damage to the institution's image and brand (Brennan & Stern, 2017). When a crisis starts to unfold, presidents must realize a clock is ticking and the leadership team must figure out how to respond quickly. If they wait too long, other voices can take over the narrative and make the president look unresponsive (Gardner, 2016). A successful crisis response requires the president to consult with both legal and communication experts prior to responding publicly (Parrot, 2012). Gardner (2016) suggested that instead of making a statement, the president should consider opening a dialogue with stakeholders; that dialogue can often take place both in person and online.

That is one reason experts advised the president should assign someone to track incoming digital messages and social media responses so any issues can be addressed as quickly as possible (Parrot, 2012). Presidents must respond to a crisis from the heart; communication must recognize the pain and loss people in the community might be experiencing (Zdziarski, 2016). Perlmutter (2018) further advised that presidents must differentiate between a real crisis and routine problem. A crisis demands that a president and senior leadership summon a team, take steps to prevent further harm, and provide information to the public as quickly as possible (Perlmutter, 2018). What presidents say and how they engage with community members during a tragedy is essential to an effective and compassionate response (Bowen et al., 2018). Presidents are also called on to respond to world, national and local crises. One recent report suggested presidents consider offering public support to students who champion social justice-related activities (Bowen et al., 2018). However, presidents have expressed concerns about using digital

platforms to weigh in on controversial subjects, fearing they might offend stakeholders (Zaiontz, 2015).

Some research shows presidents can effectively connect with stakeholders by including posts that show life outside of a president's official role. By including personal posts, a president might be able to connect with stakeholders' activities and interests in powerful ways (Bowen et al., 2018). For example, including hobbies and passions in presidential digital posts can help build relationships, open up dialogue and show that a president is approachable (Ahlquist, 2018). Zaiontz (2015) found that more personal content humanized leaders and might better engage those less interested in news about the institution or issues related to a president's thought leadership expertise. Ahlquist (2018) also advocated that presidents should go beyond social media for their digital engagement and experiment with newsletters and podcasts. In a recent study, the authors advocated for university communicators to explore shared values, develop partnerships and empower stakeholders (Hou & Macnamara, 2017). As noted earlier, institutions must engage on digital platforms with a number of key stakeholders including prospective students and families, alumni and donors, and the community at large. One key frustration for presidents, however, is that others believe they are infinitely accessible through email and other forms of digital engagement (Gagliardi et al., 2017).

College presidents struggle to control messaging in the digital age (Smith, 2017). Given the age of most presidents, they have witnessed dramatic changes in the realm of crisis communication. The executive director of the Aspen Institute described the struggle when commenting about the findings of a report on college presidents:

A lot of them came up in an era where if a crisis arose, they were the first to know...but today the reality is there may be thousands or hundreds of thousands who know before them, and responding to crises in those moments is significant. (Smith, 2017)

According to Ikenberry (2010), public reaction to a controversy is faster and more powerful in the electronic age. He added that it can be difficult for an institution's leadership to keep track of how a decision is being perceived online. "While it is easier for presidents to be well informed, it is also easier for presidents to waste time and confuse priorities, too often drawn into conversations and issues that don't merit their personal involvement" (Ikenberry, 2010, p. 3). Ikenberry (2010) noted that digital engagement cannot replace face-to-face interaction with key stakeholders, and warned that a president cannot become isolated by relying too heavily on virtual touch points. "A presidency that combines sophisticated communications technology with a powerful human presence can be an unbeatable combination" (Ikenberry, 2010, p. 3). One study (Bowen et al., 2018) suggests presidents prioritize social media presence and post consistently, multiple days of the week. If that is not possible, leaders should consider having a social media team support their efforts (Bowen et al., 2018). However, the challenge for presidents will be to find time to maintain a robust digital presence, while not neglecting face-to-face interactions that are essential to creating a strong sense of community among stakeholders.

### **Sense of Community Theory**

In 1986 McMillan and Chavis developed the sense of community theory to define a phenomenon experienced throughout the world, including college campuses. In building upon previous research, McMillan and Chavis cited Gusfield (1975) who offered a definition of the term "community." One definition focused on the geographic nature of the word including the

neighborhood or city. The other on the relational aspect of community which included the quality of human connections, not necessarily tied to the location (Gusfield, 1975).

McMillan and Chavis (1986) argued that four criteria defined a sense of community; they include membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). The authors developed the following definition: “Sense of community is a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members’ needs will be met through their commitment to be together” (McMillan, 1976, p. 9).

To explore each of the criteria further, membership is the sense that one has invested a part of oneself to become a member and has a right to belong (Aronson & Mills, 1959; Buss & Portnoy, 1967). McMillan and Chavis (1986) found that membership has five tenets including: boundaries, emotional safety, a sense of belonging and identification, personal investment, and a common symbol system. Most institutions of higher education have some type of boundary; even the cohorts of a fully online program constitute a virtual boundary. A college community offers emotional safety, in the form of resident assistants, counseling, tutors, advisors and coaches. The sense of belonging and identification recognized the belief that one is a part of the group, is accepted and is willing to sacrifice on behalf of the group (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Most members of a college or university community have been accepted through an admission process and make ongoing sacrifices to remain in the group. The theory suggested that members make personal investments to be a part of a community, which in higher education could connect to both the rigor of acceptance standards as well as the academic rigor. McMillan and Chavis

(1986) noted that many communities utilize a common symbol system, which is relevant to the many traditions of higher education surrounding campus life, athletics and academic ceremonies.

The second tenet of the theory involves influence or the sense that for a member to want to join a group, they must have some say over what the group does (Peterson & Martens, 1972; Solomon, 1960; Zander & Cohen, 1955). According to McMillan and Chavis (1986), members are more attracted to a community where they feel influential; there is an important relationship between cohesiveness and the community's influence on a member to conform; conformity brings people together and indicates cohesiveness; and influence of a member on the group and influence of the group on a member are both important and simultaneous forces. A college or university community can offer both the opportunity to influence a member and the chance for a member to shape the educational community.

A third criteria in this theory is the integration and fulfillment of needs. McMillan and Chavis (1986) also referred to this concept as reinforcement. They defined it as the need for the association in the community to be rewarding for its members. Reinforcement and the fulfillment of needs is essential to a strong community; rewards may include status of membership and competence of other members; individual values shape the needs that are fulfilled; and a strong community allows people to come together and meet the community's needs as well as their own. The nature of a university community inherently offers members an opportunity to fulfill many needs including higher education itself; students invest money and significant time in a university community and are rewarded with a degree. Higher education also offers members the opportunity to connect with each other for mutual needs fulfillment, which may include academic collaboration, networking and service for the common good.

The final tenet of the sense of community theory is shared emotional connection, which can often be particularly strong in a university community. McMillan and Chavis (1986) argued that this shared history can be strengthened by the more people interact, the more likely they are to become close. The quality of the interaction matters, and the importance of the shared event can influence the strength of the community bond (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Investment can play a role in the strength of the community; there is no doubt that those involved in higher education devote significant time and resources to be a part of the community.

In further describing the theory, McMillan and Chavis (1986) specifically cited an example of a university as a strong setting for group cohesiveness. They described the formation of a basketball team in a university dormitory setting. Members seek to fulfill an individual need to participate; the team is connected by a physical boundary of a dormitory; and has contact through the time spent together in practice. The team plays a game together and wins to create a shared successful event; members sacrifice through practice and playing and are recognized for their success. Someone suggests they buy matching jerseys, an indication of influence and the creation of a shared symbol. This type of community building happens every day in both traditional and virtual university communities.

In fact, Tinto (1993) found that students who build strong feelings of community would be more likely to persist than those who felt alone and alienated. In 2002, Rovai cited the sense of community theory in making the case that the emerging field of online education must take deliberate steps to ensure student satisfaction and commitment. Rovai also cited McMillan and Chavis when developing a 20-item Classroom Community Scale to determine connectedness and

learning (Rovai, 2002). Wiseman et al. (2004) cited the theory as they sought to determine students' sense of community at a commuter college campus.

A Sense of Community Index (SCI) was developed for those in the social sciences to gauge a sense of community. The SCI, which is based on McMillan and Chavis' research (1986), has been used in studies of a variety of cultures around the world. Lyu (2012) explored the sense of community in online brand social networking sites. Algesheimer et al. (2005) used the sense of community theory in their study of European car clubs to explore the social influence of a brand community. Carlson, Suter and Brown (2008) cited the sense of community theory in their business study of social versus psychological brand communities.

One recent study found that university communicators placed a higher importance on marketing online rather than driving community engagement (Hou & Macnamara, 2017). The authors advocated that universities seek to drive participation to build community rather than just drive followers; to transform digital engagement efforts toward encouraging community engagement. As higher education struggles with a decline in the number of high school graduates (Will, 2016) and government funding (Marcus, 2019), a strong sense of community will be needed to ensure a university has the support needed to be sustainable in challenging times ahead.

The sense of community theory grounded this particular study because institutions of higher education are complex organizations with many stakeholders who can each be considered essential in terms of recruiting and retaining students, recruiting and retaining faculty and staff, raising financial support beyond tuition, and ensuring strong community support for the college or university mission (Weary, 2009). Each of the tenets in the sense of community theory shaped



the questions used in the interview guide and the document analysis guide. Higher education presidents and leaders in enrollment management, marketing and communications, and advancement were asked to consider how their digital engagement contributed to a sense of community at their institution as defined by McMillian and Chavis (1986). This study advanced the research in this field because of its connection to the study that grounded it and shaped the research.

### **Summation**

This research study contributed to the current literature on presidential digital engagement since prior research is limited and must be updated frequently as digital platforms and usage change. Prior research has focused on types of engagement, best practices, and highlighted presidents who amass large followings (Ahlquist, 2017; Zaiontz, 2015). However, there was a gap in the research regarding how presidential digital engagement fosters a sense of community among key stakeholders. This study is timely because the number of high school seniors is declining (Busta, 2019), which means institutions must sharpen their messaging in an increasingly competitive environment. This research has the potential to add to the knowledge of best practices and determine what strategies will be most effective in the future and why presidential digital engagement is important. Presidents often come under great scrutiny during crises; this research has the potential to offer guidance that could help leaders more effectively engage with community members during difficult times (Lee, 2016).

This researcher endeavored to learn more about the importance of presidential digital engagement in terms of the overall institutional goal of maintaining strong connections with key stakeholders. This research is informed by the perspectives of senior leadership who offered

insight into the importance of presidential digital engagement to the essential divisions of a university including enrollment management, marketing and communications, and advancement. It is the intent of the researcher to share their perspectives and best practices with leaders of other colleges and universities to help them more effectively use digital communications tools in a time of rapid change in terms of both technology and higher education overall.

### CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

The role of a college president must evolve with changing times and the demands of a shifting higher education landscape. Research has shown presidents are expected to fill many roles in a college community including fundraiser, financial steward, problem solver and cheerleader (Selingo et al., 2017). Presidents implement strategic goals by engaging stakeholders including students, parents, faculty, staff, alumni and members of the community at large (Eckel and Kezar, 2016). Trombley (2007) argued, “The responsibilities that are now commonly considered part of the typical presidential portfolio have undergone a dramatic change and expansion during the past few decades” (p. 14). As the United States becomes more reliant on digital communication, presidents are expected to conduct much of their essential engagement on platforms such as videos, emails, websites, and social media (Ahlquist, 2017).

The importance of presidential digital engagement in higher education has been growing as the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century comes to an end. Prior research (Ahlquist, 2017; Zaiontz, 2015) has focused on types of engagement and highlighted presidents who amass large followings on social media. However, there is a gap in the research regarding how presidential digital engagement fosters a sense of community with key stakeholders. McMillan and Chavis (1986) wrote, “Sense of community is a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members’ needs will be met through their commitment to be together” (p. 9). Consequently, this study was designed around the sense of community theory (McMillan & Chavis, 1986), which contains four essential elements. The first element is membership; in this case the connection that various stakeholders feel toward the institution of higher education. Members of a college community experience a

sense of belonging and relatedness to other students, faculty, staff and alumni. The second element is influence; stakeholders have a sense that they matter and make a difference to the college or university. The third element is reinforcement; the sense that community members' needs will be met by the institution because they are a valued part of the college or university. The last criteria is a shared emotional connection; that members share history, common places, time together and similar experiences (McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

The findings of this study may benefit college and university presidents as well as those who work in higher education marketing and communications, enrollment management, and advancement. The larger impact, however, may be on the sustainability of higher education at large. Colleges and universities need strong community engagement and participation to thrive (Fitzgerald et al., 2015), and engaged students, parents, alumni, donors, faculty and staff are all essential to creating a culture of academic excellence, philanthropy and longevity (Hayes, 2007; Meyers, 2014; Stoner, 2018). In this era of declining enrollments and campus closures (Busta, 2019), this study examined the importance of the president's role in engaging the stakeholders needed to ensure an institution of higher education is sustainable in an increasingly digital world. The purpose of this multiple-case study was to explore how presidential digital engagement contributes to fostering a sense of community at institutions of higher education.

### **Research Question**

This study was guided by the following research question: How do college presidents leverage digital engagement to foster a sense of community?

## **Research design**

Yin (2018) argued the case study is appropriate when trying to explore a “how” or “why” question regarding contemporary events. In order to increase trustworthiness for this research, two sets of data were collected, analyzed and corroborated to answer the research question (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Throughout the research process, the researcher sought to maintain and demonstrate the trustworthiness and rigor of the research design. Lincoln and Guba (1985) proposed four criteria for qualitative research including the following: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. To demonstrate credibility, the researcher used multiple methods of data collection including semi-structured interviews and a document analysis of presidents’ digital communications. Contained within the literature review are detailed descriptions of the many facets of the research question, which demonstrated the transferability of the research. As Yin (2018) observed, the purpose of the literature review was not to determine what is known about a topic, but rather to uncover questions yet unanswered. The methodology section established dependability by clearly describing the research methods and therefore demonstrating how the study could be repeated. The extensive research process, as well as the audit trail (Yin, 2018) of the data collection methods, ensured confirmability.

As digital engagement has become more popular among students, faculty, staff, alumni and donors, a college or university president must also communicate on the same platforms as those key constituents in order to build the strong relationships required for successful leadership (Ahlquist, 2018; Bowen et al., 2018). After interviewing 22 college and university presidents, Zaiontz (2015) concluded that being active on social media was not a requirement for a 21st century leader. That study was published several years ago and the role of social media has

changed dramatically since then, presenting an opportunity for further research. The Aspen Institute report (2017) suggested that presidents need communication skills that evolve along with the changing norms on social media and digital trends. Brooks & Normore, (2010) suggest that to be information literate, leaders need to know why, when and how to use these tools and think critically about the information they can provide. Ahlquist (2018) has conducted extensive research on digital engagement and higher education leadership, advocating for transparent communication and community building through a robust digital strategy. Overall, there is limited research on the impact of a college president's digital engagement, which by its nature must be updated as technology changes and usage evolves. This study sought to close a gap in the research and explore the connection between presidential digital engagement and fostering a sense of community at a college or university.

This multiple-case study included interviews with presidents and senior leaders at four institutions of higher education. Yin (2018) defined a case study as a method to investigate a contemporary issue in depth and in its real-world context. Yin (2018) also affirmed that a multiple-case study can be considered more robust; that the analytic benefits of having two or more cases can be significant. The focus of this research was on four colleges and universities with leaders who have been recognized as higher education presidents to follow on popular social media platforms (Ahlquist, 2017). Their interviews offered insight into best practices that tie directly to the conceptual framework for the study as outlined by McMillan and Chavis (1986). Yin (2018) argued interviews are one of the most significant sources of case study evidence; data collected can shed light on a contemporary phenomenon as well as offer insights from participants' perspectives. To best determine the impact of a president's digital engagement on multiple stakeholders, the researcher interviewed the vice presidents or senior leaders of

enrollment management, marketing and communications, and advancement at each of the colleges. By focusing on several institutions and a variety of leaders, the interviews offered broader and deeper insight into the research question.

This study also included a document analysis of presidential social media posts, community-wide emails, and videos over an academic semester to corroborate the findings in the interviews with college presidents and senior leaders as well as provide texture to the research. Yin (2018) suggested documentation is important in terms of corroborating and building upon data collected from other sources. This researcher had access not only to presidents who explained how and why they communicate with stakeholders, but also the material that was disseminated as well as the reaction to that messaging. Patton (2001) argued that triangulation strengthens a study by combining several kinds of methods or data. The two forms of collection enhanced the trustworthiness of the data. This research design incorporates the five components advocated by Yin (2018) which included the following: a case study question, propositions (issues that should be considered in the study), case, the logic linking data to the propositions, and the criteria for interpreting the findings.

## **Sample**

This researcher used purposeful sampling, which involved identifying and selecting individuals who are knowledgeable about or experienced with a phenomenon of interest (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). College and university presidents who have designated as “digital leaders” by Ahlquist (2017) were invited to participate in this study. Ahlquist (2017) created the list based on presidents who successfully use popular social media platforms to connect followers to their universities in unique ways (Ahlquist, 2017). The featured presidents

set the standard for best digital engagement practices for higher education professionals (Ahlquist, 2017). To narrow this list of presidents, this researcher focused on private institutions with undergraduate enrollments under 10,000 students.

In order to further this field of study, this researcher sought to broaden the understanding of the impact of the presidents' digital engagement efforts. To best gauge how presidents foster a sense of community, the researcher also interviewed the vice presidents or senior leaders of marketing and communications, enrollment management, and advancement at each institution. These additional senior leaders provided insight into the role of presidential digital engagement in fostering a sense of community in essential divisions in a higher education institution: marketing and communications, enrollment management, and advancement. These three areas are important because they are essential to a college's financial success and rely heavily on digital engagement to be effective.

Selingo (2017) explained that the digital engagement of students begins when they take their first standardized college admissions test in high school; they are asked a series of questions about their grades, family income, intended major, outside interests and types of colleges they prefer. Answers to those questions are sold to colleges and scholarship services setting off a non-stop digital engagement that a university undertakes to yield a first-year class (Selingo, 2017). Research also showed that students actively seek out this digital engagement and conduct their own college searches largely through websites and social media; 67% of high school seniors entering college researched schools using Facebook (EAB, 2016).

Institutions of higher education also seek to create robust social networks of graduates to strengthen alumni engagement, increase volunteerism and promote giving (Meyers, 2014).



Historically universities relied on alumni regional calls, phone-a-thons and emails. Online communities offer a faster and less expensive way to build crucial engagement opportunities (Meyers, 2014).

## **Instrumentation**

### **Participant questionnaire.**

Prior to conducting interviews, the researcher sent each participating vice president or senior leader of marketing and communications an email with a Microsoft Forms survey link. The link included an 11-question institutional questionnaire (Appendix B) to determine eligibility for participation in this study and gather basic information about each president's digital engagement practices. These questions were designed to learn more about how the institution handles presidential digital engagement and how it might connect with the sense of community theory.

### **Interview guide.**

The interviews were conducted with the researcher using a semi-structured interview guide (Appendix D), which Bernard (2015) argued leaves the researcher free to follow new lines of questioning as they arise. The interview guide was developed and used to provide a framework for the researcher to ensure questions were fair, consistent and evoked information tied to the research question and theory. The interview guide was created around the four domains of the sense of community theory (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Questions focused on how the president approaches digital engagement and what type of communication results in higher levels of stakeholder engagement. The questions were structured using the funnel

technique (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015) and kept to a reasonable length to ensure the interview could be conducted in the allotted amount of time. Roller and Lavrakas (2015) described the funnel technique as starting an interview broadly and progressively narrowing the topic to the items of highest importance to the research question.

### **Document analysis guide.**

Digital engagement was examined at each institution over the course of an academic semester. A document analysis guide was developed so digital content could be coded into themes and types of engagement. According to Bowen (2009), document analysis helps to create meaning around an assessment topic. Each post was coded to represent membership, influence, reinforcement, and shared emotional connection, the four central tenets of the sense of community theory (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). The researcher also tracked on the document analysis guide, when possible, the number of likes, shares or reposts and comments on presidential posts. Examples of comments from stakeholders were also recorded to add texture to the research.

**Pilot Test.** Creswell (2014) argued pilot testing is essential in order to improve the questions, format and sequencing of the interview. The interview guide was pilot tested on two higher education leaders, including a college president, and a vice president for enrollment management, who were not involved in this study. The purpose of the pilot test was to check for the time needed to complete the interview, as well as the clarity and sequencing of questions. Participants in the test group provided feedback including suggesting a clarification to question four regarding transparency, which they believed was confusing. This researcher rewrote the question and made the intended meaning easier to understand. Some questions had to be

eliminated or adjusted if the participant answered them in a previous response. This researcher monitored the timing carefully because the president involved in the pilot test, like most presidents, had limited available time.

### **Data collection**

During a review of the relevant literature, this researcher found Dr. Josie Ahlquist's (2017) lists of higher education presidents to follow on social media compelling. After reviewing the lists, this researcher agreed the featured college presidents set best practices for higher education leaders nationwide. The researcher sent an initial email invitation (Appendix A) to the vice president or senior leader of the institution's marketing and communications division. At institutions that met the criteria and expressed interest in participating, the researcher asked for a letter of support to include in the application to the Regis College Institutional Review Board.

After receiving approval from the researcher's home institutional review board and each participating college or university's institutional review board, the researcher sent each vice president or senior leader of marketing an email with a Microsoft Forms survey link. The researcher used an 11-question institutional questionnaire to determine eligibility for participation and gather basic information (Appendix B). Gathering this information prior to the interviews allowed the researcher to streamline the interview process. The researcher then followed up with the presidents and three members of senior leadership to arrange for individual interviews. For the interviews, the researcher first asked each participant to review and sign the informed consent form (Appendix C). After the participants signed an informed consent agreement, the researcher interviewed the college presidents and senior leaders via Zoom

telephone conferencing. The conversations were audio recorded and then transcribed by a transcription service, which signed a non-disclosure agreement.

The researcher used a semi-structured interview guide (Appendix D), which was developed, pilot tested, and used to provide a framework for the researcher to ensure questions were fair, consistent and evoked information tied to the research question and theory. Prior to each interview, the researcher asked the participant for permission to record and transcribe the interview. The interview data were recorded using an audio recorder to ensure the accuracy and dependability of the data collection process. Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes.

To strengthen the validity of the data (Yin, 2018) gathered in the interviews, the researcher conducted a document analysis of each president's public digital messages over the course of the spring semester 2019. Each message was coded into a variety of themes including: membership, influence, reinforcement and shared emotional connection; each category represented a central domain of the sense of community theory (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). The engagement was tracked based on the number of likes, shares or reposts and comments and comments on posts were reviewed to add texture to the research.

### **Ethical considerations**

The researcher followed the principles of ethics when performing interviews. In order to reduce the risk of harm to the participants, the researcher ensured the participants signed human subject consent forms (Appendix C) to inform them about the research and explain the benefits and risks to participating (Office for Human Research Protections, 2019). The researcher

explained to participants that at any point they may choose to no longer participate in the research (Office for Human Research Protections, 2019). The researcher required a non-disclosure agreement from the transcription provider. Names of participants and institutions are not revealed in the findings to maintain confidentiality. Additionally, the researcher ensured that participant information and data remained confidential by using pseudonyms and a password-protected computer, and any printed material was kept in a locked filed cabinet in an office that was locked when unoccupied.

### **Data analysis**

Yin (2018) argued a major strength of a case study design is the ability to incorporate several sources of evidence, allowing for a comprehensive examination of a phenomenon in a real-world context. Yin (2018) argued a case study is useful for explanation building; to explain the “how” or “why” some outcome has happened. Yin (2018) suggested the multiple sources of evidence allows a researcher to develop “converging lines of inquiry” where several different sources lead to the same finding (p. 127). Yin (2018) wrote that when done correctly, triangulation will result in findings that are supported by multiple sources of evidence.

Conducting a qualitative study demands that a researcher observe participants as closely as possible (Creswell, 2013). Rubin and Rubin (2012) advocated for responsive interviewing techniques which include asking main questions, probes and follow-up questions. They also suggested researchers should listen closely and ask further questions based on a participant’s responses, which is possible in a semi-structured interview guide (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). In order to fully connect with the perspectives of the participants, the researcher recorded the interviews and submitted the audio files to a professional transcription service. The transcription

service signed a confidentiality agreement to ensure the data would remain confidential. First, the researcher reviewed the transcripts along with the audio recording to verify they included accurate representations of what the participants expressed. The researcher developed summaries of each interview before creating the codebook. The researcher uploaded the transcriptions into the NVivo software platform to conduct a comprehensive process of coding themes. Each transcript was reviewed and key comments were coded by the researcher. Saldaña (2013) explained that a code is generated by a researcher to help interpret data for analysis and pattern finding. This research focused on the four domains of the sense of community theory (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). The descriptive coding process helped to interpret and summarize the data from the interviews in this multiple-case study (Saldaña, 2013). Subsequently, seven major themes and 16 supplemental theme emerged. The number of themes narrowed as key themes emerged; the central themes helped to identify the findings.

Each domain had nodes assigned to it, and within the nodes, key comments were categorized. The NVivo software nodes allow researchers to organize data in different places to look for patterns and themes (Wong, 2008). The researcher organized the comments within the nodes to create a sequential flow throughout each theme, in order to present data in a logical fashion. NVivo assists qualitative researchers in managing and analyzing data to help code transcripts looking for similarities or differences, ultimately identifying themes and developing categories (Wong, 2008). The data analysis included referring back to the literature to connect the data from this study to the chosen theoretical framework.

The researcher developed a narrative using the techniques developed by Miles and Huberman (1994), who argued that qualitative data are a sources of rich description and can

explain processes. Miles and Huberman (1994) recommended three types of analysis happening at the same time including: data reduction, data display and conclusion-drawing/verification.

The study focused on how presidents foster a sense of community through digital engagement; the document analysis was conducted in order to confirm themes, patterns and categories (Yin, 2018). A document analysis was performed on presidential digital posts publicly available at the four institutions of higher education over the course of an academic semester. Document analysis requires that data be reviewed and interpreted in order to gather meaning, gain understanding, and develop knowledge (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Bowen (2009) further explained that document analysis is a process of skimming the material, reading it more thoroughly and then interpreting the material. The themes that emerged from the document analysis contributed to the trustworthiness of the findings.

### **Limitations**

This multiple-case study presented several limitations that were beyond the control of the researcher. The first limitation was researcher bias because the researcher is involved in overseeing a university's digital engagement efforts. This study sought to overcome any potential bias by having a clear coding system to provide unbiased evaluation of the presidents' digital postings. The interview guide was piloted (Creswell, 2014) to uncover any potential bias in the questions. The researcher also maintained a clear audit trail, conducted member checking, and corroborated interview findings with document analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

A second limitation was the institutions in this proposed research were chosen by an objective measure (highlighted in research regarding college presidents' excellence in social

media engagement); however, each institution is different. A participant questionnaire was, therefore, developed and piloted to offset the potential influence of diverse institutional budgets, processes and sizes on the definition of success.

The third limitation was unforeseeable external forces that can influence the responses of participants. Some of these could be the general culture of the times including political and economic shifts as well as issues facing higher education. These potential influences were determined through a participant questionnaire that addressed these concerns. Other limitations included budget variances, geography and type of institution may influence the size and structure of the staff at each college or university and the type of social engagement, which was clarified during the initial screening survey.

Finally, the researcher recognized this was a small sample size, so the findings are internally generalizable.

### **Delimitations**

There were four delimitations associated with this study. First, the participants chosen for this study were identified based upon their recognition by researcher Dr. Josie Ahlquist (2017) who compiled lists of higher education presidents to follow on social media. Second, to narrow the list this researcher focused on private institutions with undergraduate enrollments smaller than 10,000 students. Third, the institutions are located in the United States. Finally, at each institution key personnel were interviewed, including the presidents, as well as the vice presidents or senior leaders of marketing and communication, enrollment management, and advancement.



## Summary

This research study contributed to the current literature on presidential digital engagement since this field is changing rapidly and the focus of this study addressed a gap in the field of knowledge. Prior research (Ahlquist, 2017; Zaiontz, 2015) focused on types of engagement, best practices, and highlighted presidents who amass large social media followings. However, there was a gap in the research regarding how presidential digital engagement fosters a sense of community with key stakeholders. This study sought to examine the impact a president's digital engagement has on key stakeholders in a university community through interviews with leaders in the essential divisions of marketing and communications, enrollment management, and advancement. This researcher endeavored to learn more about the importance of presidential digital engagement in terms of the overall institutional goal of maintaining strong connections with stakeholders. The researcher sought to corroborate the findings of the interviews with a document review of a president's digital engagement; therefore strengthening the value of the research. The multiple-case study design indicated the robustness of the study and strengthened the validity of the findings (Yin, 2018). Finally, the sense of community theory provided the basis for analytic generalization (Yin, 2018) making the findings applicable widely. It is the intent of the researcher to share the perspectives and best practices from this study with leaders of other colleges and universities to help them more effectively use digital communications tools to foster a sense of community on their campuses.

## CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

The purpose of this multiple-case study was to determine how presidential digital engagement impacts the sense of community among stakeholders at institutions of higher education. This multiple-case study included interviews with presidents and senior leaders at four institutions of higher education. These leaders have been recognized by another scholar as college presidents to follow on social media (Ahlquist, 2017) due to their dynamic presence on popular platforms. Their interviews offered insight into best practices and how a president's digital engagement can foster a sense of community with stakeholders using the criteria outlined by McMillan and Chavis (1986). To best determine the impact of a president's digital engagement, the researcher also interviewed senior leaders of essential divisions including marketing and communications, enrollment management, and advancement at each of the institutions. In total, 15 people participated in interviews including four presidents, as well as 11 members of their senior leadership teams and communications staff. Marketing and communications (n=7), enrollment management (n=1), advancement (n=3). A multiple-case study was appropriate for this research question because the researcher sought to explain why a phenomenon is important, a key factor when determining the relevancy of a case study (Yin, 2018).

This study also included a document analysis of presidential social media, community-wide emails, and videos over an academic semester to corroborate the findings in the interviews as well as provide texture to the research. The analysis focused specifically on presidential digital engagement separate from overall institutional messaging or social media accounts. Patton (2001) argued that triangulation strengthens a study by combining several kinds of methods or data. In this particular study, data collected via interviews and document analyses

enhanced the trustworthiness of the data by gathering evidence from different sources (Creswell, 2013).

The theoretical framework used to ground this study is the sense of community theory (McMillan & Chavis, 1986), which proposed a definition with four domains. The first element is membership; in this case the connection that various stakeholders feel toward the institution of higher education. Members feel a sense of belonging and relatedness to other students, faculty, staff and alumni. The second element is influence; stakeholders have a sense that they matter and make a difference to the college or university. The third element is reinforcement; the sense that community members' needs will be met by the institution because they are a valued part of the college or university. The last tenet is a shared emotional connection; that members share history, common places, time together and similar experiences (McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

The purpose of this multiple-case study was to determine how presidential digital engagement contributes to the sense of community among stakeholders at institutions of higher education. Colleges and universities need strong community engagement and participation to thrive because engaged students, parents, alumni, donors, faculty and staff are all essential to creating a culture of academic excellence, philanthropy and longevity (Stoner, 2018). In this era of declining enrollments and campus closures (Busta, 2019), this study examined the importance of the role of the president in ensuring an institution of higher education engages stakeholders in an increasingly digital world.

### **Overview of Key Findings**

This chapter presents the key findings of this multiple-case study, which were derived from 15 semi-structured interviews as well as a document analysis of presidential digital content

publicly available online. After analyzing the data from the interviews and document analysis, seven findings emerged, which highlight ways presidents in this study have contributed to fostering a sense of community through digital engagement. After a thematic analysis of the data, the following findings emerged:

**1. Digital engagement is an essential part of a college president's job:**

Leaders who do not engage are going to end up sideways by the wayside. We are going to be the persons of yesteryear that so often create leaders who are not nimble and not as successful as they otherwise might be. (D3)

**2. Presidential digital engagement allows community members and stakeholders unprecedented access to the institution's leader:**

[The president] is probably the most accessible president; every student has [the president's] cell phone number. [The president] can text a student...can send them a message, [the president] checks to see what students are doing on Facebook so that they know that [the president's] presence is there and [is] watching to see how they're engaging and interacting. (A2)

**3. Digital engagement gives a president the ability to meet community members' needs in a variety of ways:**

[The president] realized that a lot of the students actually needed glasses and they didn't know it. And within I think a week's time, [the president] had either enough money raised or volunteer opportunities for the students to receive the glasses and the eye care that they needed. (A2)

**4. Presidents have a unique opportunity to create powerful bonds online:**

It's striking to me how many alums I meet, sometimes I've even met alums in places unrelated to [the name of the college], literally like in an airport or something who recognize me because they've seen videos featuring me. And I think that wouldn't have been the case 20 years ago. I don't think one or two pictures in the alumni magazine have the same effect. And so I think when people actually come up and say like, 'Oh, you know, you're, you're President [name] aren't you? I saw your last video.' You know, that makes you knowable in a way that you wouldn't have been otherwise. (B3)

**5. Even presidents with limited interest or time for digital engagement can make essential shared emotional connections:**

[The president] celebrates...shares and...participates in traditions... athletics victories, which are really popular, groups winning awards, faculty doing great things. I think those things that people care about in terms of, oh, I remember these things from college. [The president]...gives people pride points. I'd say especially alums, [the president] reminds them of why they should be proud of the university. (C1)

**6. Given the rapid nature of digital communication, presidents can protect their institutions and perceptions of their leadership through connections made before, during and after a controversy and:**

I think it's more business practice now that you have to use it [digital engagement] to make announcements and spread news and amplify what you do. It's strategic. Yes, it makes us particularly transparent. I think it's just if you don't do it these days, that's at your own peril. Keeping quiet is not a good idea. (C2)

**7. Presidents can enhance their own stature and reputation as well as that of the college through strategic thought leadership shared on digital platforms.**

It's a place where you have a voice, where others are paying attention and those others could be your own alumni and your own faculty, but they could just as easily be journalists who are covering higher ed or academics at other institutions. I do think in the media-saturated world in which we live, making smart use of Twitter is a way to become visible among audiences you would like to be visible and doing it in a way that positions you as a thoughtful, engaged person. (B1)

**Research Sites**

Using purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2013), the researcher contacted seven private institutions of higher education with presidents recognized for their acumen with social media (Ahlquist, 2017). Four institutions in various locations across the United States agreed to participate in this study; they included a small historically black college (A), a private liberal arts college (B), a large research university (C), and a medium-sized Catholic university (D).

**Participants**

Presidents at four colleges and universities nationwide agreed to participate in the study. To best determine the impact of a president's digital engagement, the researcher also interviewed senior leaders of essential divisions including marketing and communications, enrollment management, and advancement at each of the institutions. In total, 15 people participated in interviews including four presidents, as well as 11 members of their senior leadership teams and communications staff. Marketing and communications (n=7), enrollment management (n=1),

advancement (n=3). These participants are referred to throughout this chapter by their institution (A, B, C, D) and by a number (1, 2, 3, 4) to protect the confidentiality of both the college or university and the participant.

### Data collection

Data collection began after one representative at each institution completed a screening questionnaire to provide the researcher with an overview of the president’s digital engagement practices. Once each participant signed a consent form, the researcher conducted interviews via Zoom teleconferencing using a semi-structured interview guide. And finally, a document analysis of each president’s publicly available social media, community-wide emails and videos over an academic semester helped to corroborate the findings in the interviews as well as provide texture to the research. The analysis focused specifically on presidential digital engagement separate from overall institutional messaging or social media accounts. The following chart provides an overview of the types of digital communications analyzed over a six-month period from January 1 until June 1, 2019.

President	Website	Twitter	LinkedIn	Instagram	Facebook	YouTube	Community emails
A	X	X	X	X	X		
B	X	X					X
C	X	X		X	X		X
D	X	X	X			X	

### **Discussion: Interview Findings**

Participants described several approaches and motivations for presidents engaging on digital platforms with stakeholders. However, seven key themes emerged from the data via interviews with presidents and key administrators at each institution of higher education. Those themes included the following: 1) digital engagement is an essential part of a college president's job; 2) presidential digital engagement allows community members and stakeholders unprecedented access to the institution's leader; 3) digital engagement gives a president the ability to meet community members' needs in a variety of ways; 4) presidents have a unique opportunity to create powerful bonds online; 5) even presidents with limited interest or time for digital engagement can make essential shared emotional connections; 6) given the rapid nature of digital communication, presidents can protect their institutions and perceptions of their leadership through connections made before, during and after a controversy and; 7) presidents can enhance their own stature and reputation as well as that of the college through strategic thought leadership shared on digital platforms.

**1. Digital engagement is an essential part of a college president's job: "I think it's absolutely essential to a college president's job, to keep the president on the ground floor." (A1)**

Many of the participants in this study agreed that presidents must be actively involved in digital engagement because it allows them to interact on the same platforms where stakeholders tend to communicate. One president explained, "I don't think you have the luxury of not engaging that way anymore." (A3) Another president said of digital engagement, "I think you probably would have a hard time avoiding it if you wanted to. I think it's actually an opportunity



rather than a task.” (B3) One vice president of institutional advancement put it succinctly and stated,

It’s obvious that being sophisticated on all platforms of social media is very important for presidents. It’s a way that presidents can keep getting messages out there; they’re central to what she or he is trying to do as president. (C3)

A senior leader in marketing and communications explained why this university has devoted significant resources to supporting presidential digital engagement. The participant stated,

I’ve come to the conclusion that it is essential. It is a critical foundational piece of being an effective communicator. That’s especially true when you’re trying to meet people where they are and trying to reach them. I would say that for a university leader to not be active with digital communications and engagement would definitely impact their overall performance and perception. (D1)

The president at that institution explained the approach to social media stating,

“There’s the whole positioning of myself as a spokesperson for the institution, at times as an intellectual leader, at times the key respondent in times of crisis, and at times the--if you will--promoter-in-chief.” (D3)

This finding is a significant one and several themes emerged including the concept that engagement should be genuine, and each president provided unique examples. Many of the participants mentioned that authenticity is essential to a president’s digital communications.

Three of the four presidents expressed concerns about peers who hire a staff to create and maintain a digital persona, examples of them include the following:

I think if you are just going to dish it off and delegate it to a Twitter assistant, well fine, then you can just have those things going from your office. But for those of us who see it, we know when it's you, when it's authentic. (C2)

“I think there are some presidents that have hired people to do their social media and their digital communication. And I don't think that works well.” (A3)

And there's absolutely no question that what people like is not...just getting a little bit of a picture of things happening on campus, but they like to know that I'm at those things. I never, for example, send out pictures that weren't taken by me. I don't have my communications people take a picture of something and then say, there was this great lecture today. You know, it has to be something that I can authentically be part of. (B3)

One vice president of advancement observed the power of authenticity is that community members know the president is “paying attention, personally cares about people and is part of the community.” (C3)

However, one of the institutions takes a different approach and has staff members produce all presidential communications. A marketing and communications leader at one institution explained that a staff member creates a content calendar for the president's Twitter account. The participant stated,

We do pay someone to write some content, to write some posts. But anything that gets posted on [the president's] account gets vetted by [the president]. So everything has

[their] stamp on it and often an edit. And so [the president's] voice is really present there.

But we do get some help getting the writing done. (D2)

The president of that university is adamant this approach does not make their Twitter feed or any other communications less genuine. When asked to respond to the criticism of other presidents in this study, this president stated,

Well, the first observation is I would challenge those people to tell me anything they do without staff. Just because this is the Internet and you use your staff shouldn't make it any different from any other time you use your staff. And in terms of my personal involvement, I receive every week or every two weeks the bundle of tweets that they assemble and I'm very involved. I certainly read every one. I edit them, I turn them into my language, my style. Just look at any dimension of the university; we're all reliant on our staff. You're only as good as your staff. So that whole question is posed in a bizarre way. And that to me is just a translation of jealousy. (D3)

For most participants, the benefits of digital engagement outweigh the potential negative effects, which include trolls, criticism, burn out and balancing with other demands of the job. Given that three of the four presidents in this study favor a hands-on approach to digital engagement, more specifically social media, this undertaking can become time consuming and somewhat risky. Unlike more broad university message, a post specifically from a president can open the individual up to criticism and can become a drain on a president's most precious resource—time.

One president in the study is hyper-connected and posts on various social media platforms throughout the day. The president stated, “My entire presidency is beyond the scope of what a president should be doing. I am positive what I do is not what the president of Harvard does.” (A3) That president wakes every day between 4:30 and 5:30 am and begins the morning on Twitter reading news articles and sharing thoughts with followers.

That approach is in contrast with another president who explained that their usage of social media has declined over time in the role due to what the president perceives as a lack of interest from followers as well as a negative tone from some followers. This participant was the outlier of the sample in this research study and said,

I think it [social media] should be used sparingly these days. I wouldn't come in outside of an initial introduction and think you're going to use it to shape the conversation. I've shied away from really doing any controversial topic discussion because you just get trolled or you get people who can't have a civil conversation, and it just deteriorates. (C2)

The vice president of advancement at that institution observed that the president was well prepared for the job, “but was still surprised by some of the things [the president] got a lot of push back on. So [the president] scaled back on somethings and adjusted some things.” (C3)

President C prefers to use social media only occasionally and communicates to the community largely through emails throughout the academic year. The participant stated, “It's just too many trolls and too many bad actors out there on these platforms that just make some of the conversation impossible, and I don't have time.” (C2) Some senior leaders at this institution do not necessarily

agree with the president's stance on social media, but respect it. The vice president of advancement remarked,

We occasionally have discussions with the senior team about that. And yes, occasionally I do wish [the president] would take a stand on something. But by and large, I agree with [the president]. It's a very complicated things to take stands on some issues. (C3)

Digital engagement is particularly important for new presidents introducing themselves to a community. One president explained, "I used it in the beginning to introduce myself. Then I used it to build momentum and celebrate things that were going on." (C2) A vice president for communications and marketing at one institution explained that during the president's inauguration the college produced videos, images and other content to introduce the new leader. "[The president] did a nice job, [in] real time, sending tweets which really engaged our community." (B1) That president recalled an example from the early days of the position when traveling to a major city away from campus. The president stated,

I was in Boston and just happened to read on Twitter that a group of Boston alums were gathering in a bar to watch a big championship basketball game we were involved in. And so having read that, I thought 'I wonder if I could stop by that bar just to kind of meet these people and say hello.' (B3)

The crowd was excited to see the president who described posting the experience on Twitter, stating,

It really kind of blew up and a lot of them posted things on social media too. So it was a very easy win early on in terms of engaging with the community because people were

quite impressed that I had taken the initiative to just show up uninvited at this sort of event. (B3)

President B explained the whole encounter would not have happened without social media and using it in unexpected and bold ways.

Another president explained the process of using LinkedIn to connect with faculty and staff in the early months of the presidency. The participant stated,

I was adding 10 connections a day and writing them a short note before I arrived saying hi, I'm [name] the new president. I understand you're in charge of this area and tell me a little bit about it. And most people wrote back appropriately...one or two paragraphs about what they do and what they think I should know about their area. And it was just a touchpoint. (C2)

Digital engagement presents limitless opportunities for new leaders to make introductions to the community, set a tone for their leadership and outline key initiatives for their presidency. It is also the time for presidents to establish expectations for what key stakeholders will see in terms of the type and frequency as well as the style of digital engagement.

**2. Presidential digital engagement allows community members and stakeholders unprecedented access to the institution's leader:**

**I try and follow my students when they want me to. I try to tell them all the time, you're welcome to follow me. I will follow you if you want me to. If you do not want me to, I won't. And then I read and pay attention to the things that they talk about. (A3)**

President A engages in virtual community building nearly all day, every day. One member of the leadership team explained the president uses a unique hashtag in most posts and makes community members feel as though they are part of a movement, not just a college. The participant stated, “So [the president] brings people in and makes them feel included in a bigger vision and broader vision that we have, not just for the institution but the impact that we should have in the community.” (A2)

One vice president of communications and marketing described presidential digital engagement as falling into two categories. The participant stated,

It just positions [the president] as the leader of the community and somebody who is actively engaged with all parts of the community. It’s sometimes ‘hard leadership’ because [the president] is making a pronouncement or sharing [their] views. And sometimes it’s the ‘soft leadership’ of just acknowledging and promoting what others in the community are doing and thinking. (B1)

One director of alumni affairs observed that graduates from Institution A know the best way to reach the college’s top leader, stating,

I think that they understand that they can call the office of the president, they could email..., but if they want to actually get a quicker response and probably engage...right away, they will go to social media and [the president] will respond to them quicker than a call to the office. (A1)

The research indicates digital engagement can also demonstrate transparency. One participant expressed admiration for the thoughtful way in which the president responds to

emails, and stated, “[The president] tries very hard and not just in the use of social media, but in [their] general leadership style to have an inclusive and open style. So [the president] tries to use all aspects of communication to reinforce that.” (C3) This vice president of advancement pointed out the president handles emails in a timely fashion and will respond thoughtfully to those who might have an opposing view on an issue, adding, “People may disagree, but I think they do appreciate the timeliness and the fact that [the president] actually does respond and pay attention to their concerns.” (C3) One vice president of communications and marketing observed that tuition increases would be an example of an opportunity to use digital engagement strategies to ensure transparency. In this institution’s case an email helped to explain the increase, which was followed by town hall meetings. The participant stated, “There is an example of us trying to be really transparent about a decision that was made by the university.” (C1) President C added, “I think it’s just if you don’t do it [digital engagement] these days, that’s at your own peril. Keeping quiet is not a good idea.” (C2)

However, presidents did acknowledge the expectations stakeholders have in terms of instant access to the institution’s leader can be overwhelming. President A stated,

I would just say that digital communication has turned the presidential timeline into something very, very, very different. It has expedited it in a way that we have never seen before, and I think this is probably the reason why people are burning out so quickly. Things just move so rapidly and everybody wants to have access to you. So you just have to try and figure it out day in and day out. But it is burning people out. (A3)

Digital engagement keeps leaders in touch and responsive in ways not possible in other eras, which overall is a positive step for the presidency. Presidents need to carefully consider



what boundaries should exist in their virtual lives as they would in the rest of their professional and personal lives. Professors have office hours as a means to ensure student know the best times to schedule a visit or drop in to seek help. Perhaps presidents need to consider the sustainability of a digital persona that is built around constant connectivity and accessibility.

**3. Digital engagement gives a president the ability to meet community members' needs in a variety of ways:**

**Several times a year [the president will] do Q and As where alums and parents can interact with [the president] or ask questions and use these moments where alums can feel like they have a voice by having that interaction [online]. [The president] takes the time to respond to them. (B2)**

Several participants pointed out that digital engagement can provide opportunities for presidents to listen as well as lead. One vice president of marketing and communications stated,

If a president is using social media to be engaged in the things that are of interest to the community, it helps build an understanding that [the president] and the institution are looking out for the community or have a shared vested interest, which I think...can help build some trust that your needs are important to the institution and they are looking out for you. (B1)

President B said they try to look at the breadth of activities happening on campus and consider whether they have paid ample attention to different constituencies. In this sense, being a digitally

connected president actually helps them be a more effective leader, attuned to the needs of the community. The president stated,

I think it's actually a little bit of a nice prompt to engagement too, because I would go to these things anyway, but sometimes I think a little bit more intentionally about...that would be a nice opportunity to kind of show some support for this sorority or for this fundraiser or something like that. So I think that it doesn't feel like a separate priority. It actually feels very integrated into what you're normally doing as a president in terms of thinking about touching different parts of the community and showing a sense of appreciation for them, which I think is the main thing people respond to in my tweets.

(B3)

President B also stated that members of the campus community

...like seeing that the president is invested in the institution, and I think it just makes it feel the event is more of an event. People who are involved in those events and activities are extremely pleased if I put something on Twitter and it gets widely shared. I think that it just kind of reinforces people's sense that there is a community there. (B3)

That said, one vice president of advancement emphasized that not all messaging should come from the president and that it must be carefully considered whether a vice president might be more appropriate in a given circumstance. The participant stated,

So we first want to make sure that we think about not everything should be the president. So we don't dilute [the president's] messaging and...presence digitally. And that's one thing that we always take the time to think through, who's the right voice? (B2)

At one institution, the president prefers to use community-wide emails to update constituents on important developments including new initiatives, achievements, recent hires as well as summaries of board of trustee meetings. A vice president of marketing and communications stated, “I think it certainly creates belonging because people feel as if they know about things that are happening and that their voice is valued.” (C1)

Digital engagement does not take the place of face-to-face interaction, but rather supplements it. One advancement leader discussed how videos can help expand a president’s reach to alumni and parents in a variety of ways. The participant stated,

[The president] tries to use videos to get messaging out there that keeps people focused on the big picture where they can interact.... [The president will] do Q and As. So that even if they don’t always agree, [the president] tries to make sure people feel like they’re being heard. (B2)

Another president described the marriage of face-to-face and digital interaction in the following way, stating,

...part of the job is being kind of mayor of the city and showing up at events and validating people’s hard work to put something together or to practice for a performance or athletic competition. So my celebrating that and my showing up are ways of amplifying it. And I use social media as a touchpoint for that. (C2)

To underscore the importance of maintaining face-to-face contacts, President C noted that their preference is to walk around campus and not drive, stating, “I know that in the course of a walk, I might have 10 to 20 touchpoints with people. So maximizing those things are important,

whether it's social media or in person.” (C2) The vice president of advancement at this university observed, “I sometimes worry that there's too much reliance on social media, especially for on-campus [communication]. People do really value face time and old-style of communication, and I think [the president has] done well with that.” (C3)

Digital engagement allows presidents who must travel to stay visible to the campus community or with alumni, parents and online students. One president explained, “There are definitely people who come up to speak to me who have gotten to know me via Twitter before ever having any personal interaction or, in fact, they've never had any personal interaction.” (B3) One vice president of marketing and communications explained there is a distance inherent in the position of a university president, especially with the demands of fundraising and campaigns, stating, “Often the president's on the road trying to do that work...they're just not as visible.” (C1) This participant believes social media can create a connection and a bond that otherwise might not exist given the demands of a modern-day presidency. A vice president for marketing and communications explained digital engagement is the perfect tool for a modern leader and stated,

Digital communications and engagement allows for omnipresence, right? Where traditional tactics would not allow. So [the president] can be in multiple places at once. [The president] can feel...very engaged and connected, whether [they are] actually on a trip somewhere or with a donor or actually sitting there speaking to someone. From the perspective of digital communications, [the president is] there. (D1)

The reach of digital engagement is wide and allows a president to have global connections with stakeholders. A vice president for advancement suggested that a stronger

connection with the president might lead to stronger support for the institution. The participant stated,

I think a pretty interesting statistic is how many alums might not know their current president. And then does that translate to a lack of engagement? I think from the advancement side, we're looking at this right now because more institutions are less regional, especially small private schools. For them to really thrive, they need to be in markets in the West Coast, the Southwest. And I think the best way to do that if the president can't be there in person is to use some type of digital strategy to ensure that our alumni feel informed and engaged and can connect with the president digitally. (B2)

One president said they might be traveling and will meet alumni in airports "...who recognize me because they've seen videos featuring me. And I think that wouldn't have been the case 20 years ago. I don't think one or two pictures in the alumni magazine have the same effect." (B3) President B explained that most of their Twitter followers are alumni and parents; students only make up approximately 20 to 25%.

One advancement leader had a unique story to share about President A's use of digital engagement to meet community members' needs. The participant explained,

[The president] had sent out a message for a group of students in [a] freshman class that [the president] was teaching because he realized that a lot of the students actually needed glasses and they didn't know it. And within I think a week's time, [the president] had either enough money raised or volunteer opportunities for the students to receive the glasses and the eye care that they needed. (A2)

Virtual touchpoints can be very powerful for a president to connect with stakeholders to ensure they know they matter to the institution and its leader. It's one part of the job to attend an event, but that attendance can pay dividends with a wider group of stakeholders if the moment is shared through social media or other forms of digital communication. Parents and alumni may feel a stronger connection to the college and its president by being included in campus events and activities even from a distance.

**4. Presidents have a unique opportunity to create powerful bonds online:**

**I recently had the opportunity to do some recruitment where I'm from.... It was amazing how just going out and telling the story and telling them to follow [the president] that it created just this momentum. Because when they go out there and they search [name of institution] or President [name of president] wow, you have a whole lot that you can find out and read about our president. (A2)**

Presidents and their senior leaders explained that digital engagement allows presidents to share their personalities in unique ways and experiment with creative ideas. One president described how they had a little fun encouraging the community to support fundraising efforts, and stated, "There's a whole set of videos around something called the president's challenge...featuring me as well as lots of faculty and staff and students doing various things." (B3)

One president starts the day reviewing digital platforms and responding to emails and posts. The president has some 5,000 connections on a social media platform and takes the time to personally celebrate milestones. The president stated, "The students tease me that the [messages]

are created by a bot. And then I go back and I said, ‘Yeah, would a bot know that [name of mascot] is our mascot?’” (C2)

One participant described how their president values social media engagement as a means to better understand the students they serve, and explained, “[The president] checks to see what students are doing on Facebook so that they know [the president’s] presence is there and [they’re] watching to see how they’re engaging and interacting. And sometimes, [the president will] make comments on that.” (A2) This senior leader said students know their president is concerned and genuinely interested in their success. One vice president observed that their president’s posts on athletic successes are among the most successful in terms of engagement.

Participants acknowledged that being truly inclusive can be an elusive goal; however, presidents and their senior leaders expressed the belief that digital engagement must be deliberate and strive for inclusivity. A president often must rely on staff members to ensure stakeholders in the community are not left out of overall digital messaging and touchpoints. One advancement leader explained,

To think that you’re going to please everyone with who you are and what you believe in and what you stand for, you won’t. So there are going to be people that may naturally not gravitate toward what we are about or what we stand for. (A2)

A vice president for marketing and communications observed,

As your student body becomes more diverse and as a community, you start acknowledging, embracing, celebrating different traditions, right? There seems to be a

really fine and ill-defined line between embracing and celebrating that, and appropriating that. (B1)

A senior leader of enrollment management remarked that true inclusivity can be difficult to achieve, stating,

I think that desire and the intent will be there. But I feel like there's always going to be somebody or some group that's going to feel left out, not addressed. Even with the best planning, it seems like you can't always hit it right. (C4)

A senior leader at one institution, a historically black college, said their president uses the following expression:

You can be our kind but not our color. And what [the president] means by that is we just want people who care deeply about the work that we want to do. And it doesn't matter whether you're representative of an ethnic minority. (A2)

Another president has the following philosophy:

We try to show off everything. When people think about inclusive, they think of race. But there's so much more than that. There's religion, there's political ideology, there's age, geography. So if you're going to do it [social media], there's only one way to do it. And that is to be inclusive. Otherwise you're not transparent. You're not representing your institution and you're not telling the truth. (D3)

Presidents of colleges and universities have a vast array of stakeholders to consider from a communications standpoint ranging from members of the board of trustees to students and



staff, just to name a few. To ensure meaningful bonds with as many stakeholders as possible, presidents must be deliberate in their virtual outreach just as they are in juggling a complex in-person schedule. The advantage of digital touchpoints is that the bond can be created without requiring a face-to-face interaction allowing a president to connect virtually with anyone, anywhere increasing the reach of the office exponentially.

**5. Even presidents with limited interest or time for digital engagement can make essential shared emotional connections: “I think it can definitely play a role in just fostering a sense of a common love for the institution.” (B3)**

Throughout the course of the interviews with participants, it became clear that these touchpoints came naturally to each of the presidents. Even the president who was least enthusiastic about social media in this study, seamlessly made shared emotional connections through digital engagement. The vice president of marketing and communications stated, “That’s kind of right in [the president’s] wheelhouse, big important things on campus. [The president] celebrates and...shares and...participates in traditions. Especially with alums, [the president] reminds them of why they should be proud of the university.” (C1) President C explained why they believe these touchpoints are so important to a university’s alumni community, stating,

I think that when they see stuff that’s relevant to them in the storyline, that is an emotional connection because it reminds them of a very special time in their lives when they were going through this sort of intellectual, social and psychological development.  
(C2)

These touchpoints help with connections with every type of constituent: students, staff, faculty, alumni, parents and the community. One president explained that if they were to rank the

most engaging posts, it would be touchpoints that speak to people's pride in the institution. The participant stated, "I actually think those kinds of things are very valuable in creating that sense of community." (B3) President B went on to make the following observation and said, "It's one of the things that's problematic about social media is that it so easily speaks to emotion and kind of cultivates partisanship, but channeling that into the kind of harmless partisanship of-- something like football rivalry--is helpful." (B3)

Another president said it is important that stakeholders get to know the university leader as a person and stated,

To me this is sort of a new generation of leadership. Don't imprison yourself into something that is not yourself and then interact with people; it's not fair to them. It's not fair to you and you will not be effective. You are who you are. (D3)

Presidents are divided about whether to share personal information about their families with stakeholders. One of the presidents shares photos and stories about their young family on social media posts. Just as President A uses a hashtag to create a strong college community, this president also uses a hashtag to tell the story of the experience of raising a young son. The participant added, "And people seem to love that. People love [these posts] in a way that I didn't see coming. But people form strong emotional connections, really I would argue, through the use of these hashtags." (A3) That president explained how each social media platform is approached differently. Facebook is used for thought leadership as well as touting accomplishments of the institution and brand management. Instagram focuses on the president's life including family posts. The president further explained, "Twitter is the place where I engage politically, where I engage social justice-wise, where I receive a tremendous amount of information." (A3)

Another president said Twitter is a big part of their overall presidential profile and an important method of engagement. The president stated,

I tweet a lot about things happening at the college, about things happening in higher ed. Very seldom if never do anything kind of personal about my life, my family, that kind of thing unless it's something kind of related to college business. (B3)

At Institution D, the president's social media feed includes ongoing posts with photos and quotes from a pet. The vice president of marketing and communications stated,

That just seemed like a natural win for us in terms of adding to [the president's] persona, making it feel authentic, taking it to a place where people can enjoy themselves and break free of the usual constraints of how we communicate with each other and just bring kind of some fun to it. (D1)

The president also explained,

First of all, you know, I'm the proud [pet parent] so I can't help myself. But even if I could help myself, I'd still throw [name of pet] in there. 'Cause people love [pets]. He's a good tool for all this and it's just hard not to love a pretty [pet]. (D3)

Shared emotional connections from the bond of animal ownership to the love of an athletic team, seem particularly well suited for a college or university president's digital engagement. A collegiate community lends itself naturally to a sense of place and traditions that ground many community members. Most presidents intuitively embrace these connections and should find it easy to celebrate them on digital platforms as well as in person.

**6. Given the rapid nature of digital communication, presidents can protect their institutions and perceptions of their leadership through connections made before, during and after a controversy.**

**So presidents were never really off duty, but with social media you're literally never off duty. Things can come up at any time, any day. And the volume of it is just extreme. It certainly adds to the complexity of a president's job. (C3)**

One vice president of advancement observed that digital engagement can present an opportunity to simply listen and stay ahead of problems that may arise. Presidents can quickly use digital platforms to respond to a situation before it escalates. This theme was reinforced by another vice president of advancement—these leaders must be concerned about protecting the institution and the president to ensure support for the college or university is not threatened. This participant stated,

There's definitely, I would say, moments where not everyone feels that their voices are being heard. And I think [the president] uses that digital presence or technology to try to keep ahead of trends or feelings on campus or off campus when we start to feel that alums are starting to get frustrated or faculty. (B2)

Digital engagement allows presidents to build goodwill and trust prior to a controversy. Social media and other communication platforms should be used regularly as a means for allowing stakeholders access to the president. Those essential connections can be important should the president need the trust of the community in a crisis. One vice president of marketing and communication observed the following about presidential digital engagement, stating,

It's important on its own, but also pays dividends down the road when you need to have that trust of your constituents, when you need the students to trust that you're coming from the right place, when you need the alums to know that you're stewarding the institution in the right direction. (C1)

The vice president of advancement at that institution noted that President C is known for responding thoughtfully to the many emails that come to the president's inbox. The participant stated, "I think that people definitely feel there's a pretty easy and open feedback mechanism, whether they be students, faculty, staff or alumni." (C3)

One president put it succinctly, stating,

I don't think the world ends if you're not using digital media to engage, but it's a huge missed opportunity. In this day and age when people are really looking for authenticity and they're very suspicious of power, the more you can do to seem human and seem relevant and real, I think the better for your presidency. (B3)

Another president expressed a similar sentiment, stating,

One nice thing about transparency is it shows you are a person, it shows you are a vulnerable person, it shows you are an honest person and one could conclude you're, therefore, a person who cares about the other. So social media can very much help us with that. (D3)

However, many participants noted that the rapid nature of digital communication presents unique challenges. It is nearly impossible for even hyper-connected presidents with large

communications staff to be immediately aware of every potential controversy that might be spreading on social media platforms. One vice president of advancement said,

I think [they use] technology as a president to make sure that [they] can be responsive, create a sense of urgency and that [they] can give an update as quickly as possible on behalf of the college if there's a major crisis. (B2)

This participant further explained President B tries to respond quickly to tragedies that affect members of the college community. This vice president of advancement offered an example of how the president might respond, stating,

On behalf of the president and that the [name of institution] family cares and is supporting them. So we use it both for crisis management on campus and when something's happening as well in other parts of the country or in the world as well. (B2)

The vice president of marketing and communications at that institution observed that information circulates quickly on social media and that "social listening" is important to avoid a situation from spiraling out of control.

Many participants noted that presidential voice matters during a controversy. A senior leader in admission at one university observed that the president is the leader of the community and that matters to stakeholders. The participant stated, "I think there are times when it's critically important that the message come from [the president]. It does help to kind of influence how the community is going to move forward." (C4) One vice president of marketing and communication observed that their president strategically reaches out to key constituents including trustees via email to apprise them of an impending controversy. The participant stated,

I think that really created a sense of belonging in that you are part of the brain trust of the university, helping us think about things. And that we care about your opinion and we also kind of want to deputize you to help us when other people are complaining. (C1)

The participant explained that the response to emails to the board of trustees proactively has been much better received than having key stakeholders call or email seeking more information after a controversy appeared in the newspapers. It often does not take much effort to take the time to keep key stakeholders informed of a situation or acknowledge pain, and that effort can ensure the community understands the president and the institution cares about members of the community. These touchpoints early in an unfolding crisis or controversy can help protect both the president and the institution.

**7. Presidents can enhance their own stature and reputation as well as that of the college through strategic thought leadership shared on digital platforms:**

**[The president is] very respected, so [they are] a decorated president. [The president is] very involved civically...serves on numerous boards. [The president] is sought after for [their] insight. [The president] has a reputation for being innovative and creative so it attracts individuals and they want to be around that. (A1)**

College presidents historically have been influential in their communities, but digital platforms can offer a much wider audience for a leader. One vice president for marketing and communications said Twitter is an important place for a university president to engage. The participant stated,

It is a place where you have a voice, where others are paying attention and those others could be your own alumni and your own faculty, but they could just as easily be journalists who are covering higher ed or academics at other institutions. (B1)

One president of a smaller college made the point that larger institutions have broad reputations that automatically attract students, donors and media attention. Smaller institutions have to work harder to get attention. In regards to larger universities with national reputations, the president stated,

I don't know how much the president's social and digital engagement will impact or influence the community and those donors. However, for all of the other institutions where they have a unique opportunity to attract a wide range of students, I think not engaging socially and digitally and letting folks know what you're doing, what you're about, what the institution stands for, will really do the institution a disservice. (A3)

President A, according to the senior leadership team, has used digital platforms to bring the reach of this presidency far beyond their small institution. One participant stated,

Folks really do look to [the president] as a thought leader and they look for [the president] to give comments on situations and to give insight on how to react to certain things political, racial or other concerns. I think that folks really look forward to what [the president] has to say on various issues. (A1)

The senior leader of marketing and communications at one institution expressed the opinion that presidential visibility is tied to institutional visibility, stating,



We've talked a lot about how critical it is that you can't have a university that's on the rise and trying to elevate its reputation if its leader is not out there speaking with regularity as well. You can't have--from my perspective--you can't have one without the other. It has to be the institution and the institution's leader. (D1)

A senior leader in admission at a large research university said the complexity of an institution with graduate and professional schools complicates the president's messaging. The participant stated,

I would say for the majority of undergraduates, they are most concerned about what is happening with the undergraduate population and really don't care a whole heck of a lot about the school of [division of university] or the school of [division of the university]. (C4)

Presidents in the study explained they feel compelled to speak out on higher education issues and issues that directly affect their community members. Though some of the presidents expressed concerns about taking a stand publicly on controversial issues, they all agreed there are some matters that compel them to use their presidential voice. All of the leaders who participated in this research have spoken out publicly in support of protecting students in the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program. They also take a stand on immigration policy affecting higher education as well as sexual misconduct regulations under Title IX. One president stated, "We are selective and we try to make it on topics that are entirely relevant to higher education." (C2) One vice president of communications said their president feels constrained in terms of the public thought leadership role presidents once had. The

participant attributes the reticence by some leaders to speak out directly to their need to be the university's chief fundraiser. This vice president stated,

Here's the distinction I guess I would make. [The president is] not hesitant to or hasn't been hesitant to express [their] opinion when it comes to things like DACA where we have undocumented students who are enrolled here and they're part of our community. [The president] is not hesitant to take a clear and forceful stand when it comes to protecting members of the community. (B1)

Participants offered mixed opinions on whether it is worth it to speak out on controversial issues in these divided times in America. One vice president of marketing and communication said their president prefers to stay out of controversies and allow any statements to come from main university channels. The participant stated,

[The president] just wants to keep [their] happy retweets, happy shares on social and not have that stuff come from [the president]. You're probably sensing a little of bit of frustration on my part, but as a reality that's just not who [the president] is. I think there is a benefit for [the president] to be weighing in on these things. [The president is] just not comfortable with it. (C1)

President C responded,

Everything I say is, even if it's my personal opinion, it is the voice of the university and on controversial subjects I can't be taking sides and have strong opinions even if I do have them personally. (C2)

Another president has a vastly different approach and speaks out on a range of issues and stated,

I don't struggle with when to use my voice because I wasn't given this voice to fail to use it. And I'm not going to be the right fit for every school. Every school doesn't want a strident, politically active, socially engaged president. They want a smaller version of the presidency. I don't want that version. (A3)

A member of that president's leadership team added,

Even though [the president] has the post of president of the university, [they] definitely [make] social media feel like it's more of a personal take on political engagement. Yes, [they are] the president but it feels like it is an authentic version of [the president] and not a representation of the college when [the president is] posting things. (A1)

It is interesting to note that it may be easier for the president of a smaller HBCU to speak out because of the school's mission and therefore, its community's expectations are clearly defined. However, participants explained that a large research university may inherently have a more divergent group of stakeholders. Another college vice president described their leader's approach this way:

[The president] really thinks hard about...messaging and...takes the stance that [the president's] job is really to represent [name of institution] and where we need to be as an institution versus [the president's] personal views. I think [they are] careful about how [they] balance...personal beliefs with how [they] need to represent the college as president. (B2)

Participants explained that deciding when to speak out on controversies or tragedies in the news can be a challenge. One president said they do not speak out on every tragedy, but instead seeks to determine if an event has a tie to any members of the university community and if they need support. President C stated, “It doesn’t have to come as a big statement from the president and can be outreach at a lower level, which is just as effective.” (C2) That institution has developed a set of guidelines to determine when the institution and/or the president will respond to national or international events and tragedies. Another president more frequently responds to national and international issues and those statements may be in addition to what the college might say publicly. After a recent mass shooting not far from the college, President A was actually ahead of their communications team in terms of posting a response on social media. The senior leader stated,

What [the president] tells students is that you have to have a voice and that you have to advocate for something that you’re deeply passionate about. And if [the president] were to be silent, [they] wouldn’t be an authentic president. (A2)

Another university decided it would not continuously address every controversy as it unfolded. Instead senior leaders decided to try a different approach as the president explained,

We finally put together a set of statements. It's eight or 10 that elucidated our principles and when we released it, we said this is what we stand for. This is the rock on which we are firmly mounted and we will remain this way. So there have been a couple of times when we've been able to refer people back to that. (D3)

It is clear from the interviews that presidential digital engagement is a growing area of attention for presidents, marketing and communications teams, as well as advancement and enrollment management leaders. Presidential leadership and voice do have to be featured prominently in digital platforms for the overall reputation of the institution and the individual who leads it.

### **Discussion: Document Analysis Findings**

A document analysis was conducted of the social media accounts and publicly available community emails and videos of the four university presidents from the time period of January 1, 2019, until June 1, 2019. The analysis focused specifically on presidential digital engagement separate from overall institutional messaging or social media accounts. This document analysis was performed to triangulate the data obtained from the interviews. Indeed, the seven themes from the interviews were reinforced and supplemented by the document analysis of more than 750 presidential communications. This researcher is selectively reporting data from the document analysis in order to protect the identities of the participants.

**Digital engagement is an essential part of a college president's job.** The document analysis illustrated how the leaders choose to conduct such communications is as varied as the leaders themselves. President A proved to be the most prolific communicator with a robust presence on several social media platforms that document every facet of their job and personal life. This president is a one-person marketing powerhouse who uses creative hashtags to build the university's brand and a sense of belonging among stakeholders. President A has between 2,000 and 3,000 followers on each of the following platforms: Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn

and Twitter. President D presented a similarly robust presence on Twitter, but one that was far less personal and felt more institutional in its approach. In fact, the document analysis confirmed what the interviews revealed--that the communications are produced by staff members and not by the president. Photographs and videos are professional quality unlike other presidents in the study who clearly take “selfies” and demonstrate they are a part of the events they depict. President D’s most popular Twitter posts focus on beautiful images of his campus and often use the same hashtag to promote the institution. This president also saw robust engagement on videos promoting the university’s day of giving. President D has more than 5,000 connections on LinkedIn, but does not engage as actively on that platform as he does on Twitter, where the president has more than 7,000 followers. President D was the only participant who has experimented with TikTok, a video-sharing social networking service popular among young people. President B prides themselves on authenticity and tends to focus on events attended personally. [President B] has more than 3,000 followers on Twitter and documents a full range of campus life as well as their role as the community leader. President B, like all the other presidents in this study, positions themselves as a champion of the athletic teams and their successes. President B also sends out several detailed community-wide emails each semester to update on key issues and initiatives. President C made it clear in the interview that they are reticent to engage on social media, however, they lead an effort to enhance the transparency of the administration through detailed community emails. President C takes great pride in celebrating milestones with stakeholders virtually. Each president explained how digital engagement was essential as they introduced themselves to the community, a time period that was not covered in this document analysis. President D used a video introduction when they arrived on campus five years ago; that video had strong engagement with more than 2,000 views.

Another video showed President D launching a Twitter account and had more than 7,800 views. President D now has nearly that number in Twitter followers, the second highest among the four presidents in this study. Each of the presidents used video introductions when they were appointed as leaders, and president C used LinkedIn to connect with various members of the faculty and staff.

**Presidential digital engagement allows community members and stakeholders unprecedented access to the institution's leader.** The document analysis revealed many instances of presidents responding to stakeholders who reach out on social media. In one instance with president A, a prospective student posted on Twitter that he enjoyed visiting the college. President A encouraged the student to apply and explained how the college might transform the student's life. In another post, President A was asked on Twitter how to get college-themed gear. They responded a short time later with an email address to order the gear and wrote, "...tell her you need some gear and that I sent you to her. She'll take care of it." President A frequently comments on other people's social media posts and responds to those who reach out on digital platforms. This president has a very down-to-earth persona and often comments on issues in popular culture as well as in the news.

**Digital engagement gives a president the ability to meet community members' needs in a variety of ways even when they are away from campus.** Many presidents use digital platforms to show the breadth of their responsibilities and the roles they play in the broader campus community. Each president uses digital platforms to perform their essential function of fundraising for their institutions often getting quite creative in the process. President B has a humorous series of challenges to encourage stakeholders to financially support the college.

President B also posted a photo of themselves at an event to increase college access and outcomes for low-income students. President C had a large response to a post of themselves with a well-known politician promoting affordable childcare. All the presidents posted on social media showing themselves at conferences or events engaging in university business or interacting with key stakeholders. President A posted on Instagram about an opportunity for students to get free haircuts. “Just another reason to love our students and [nickname of college]. Every Sunday, one of our students donates his gifts to his peers to make sure everyone’s look is on point.” A sad duty of each president is to serve as a mourner-in-chief for the deaths that occur within a university and every participant used social media or community-wide emails to provide information and offer support.

**Presidents have a unique opportunity to create powerful bonds online.**

President A uses a hashtag to emphasize the strong community ties and create a unique brand for this college. This president also shares photos of their family, using another hashtag to highlight the experience of raising a young child. President D posts engaging quotes along with photos of the family pet. The presidents’ social media accounts are filled with photos of the leaders alongside students, faculty and alumni—a visual representation of the president’s connection with key stakeholders. Usually the accompanying message celebrates the achievements of those in the photo.

**Even presidents with limited interest or time for digital engagement can make essential shared emotional connections.** In fact, posts meant to encourage strong emotional connections are by far the largest category in this study. President D regularly highlights beautiful photos of the campus using the same hashtag to promote the university. The president



also uses photos of a pet to post inspirational quotes to the community. Some of President B's most engaging posts focus on good-natured digs at the institution's biggest sports rivalry. President B posted on Twitter on, "Some academic ceremonies are routine, but this one was a FIRST. Today [name of college] was formally awarded charter as Gamma chapter of Alpha, an honor society for first-generation college students, and we inducted our first class of honorees!" President C had a successful photo post tied to the commencement speaker prompting one follower to reply, "I like this photo! It has a great story attached—like any good picture." All of the presidents in this study posted photos before, during and after their commencement ceremonies and saw strong engagement from a variety of stakeholders including students, alumni and parents. The presidents also consistently saw strong engagement through their support of their institution's athletic programs and student athletes. Those types of posts appeared frequently in each president's social media feed.

**Given the rapid nature of digital communication, presidents can protect their institutions and perceptions of their leadership through connections made before, during and after a controversy;**

On the university's website, communitywide emails from President C document a leader who has openly dealt with a variety of incidents and controversies from student deaths to anti-Semitic acts as well as potential worker strikes. The president used this communication to denounce hateful incidents, update the investigation and announce steps to ensure it does not happen again. The president wrote in one case, "Racist expressions such as these are profoundly offensive and deeply hurtful. They contradict our values as a welcoming and inclusive

community....” This president also provides regular updates to the community with recaps of board of trustees meetings creating transparency through digital engagement.

**Presidents can enhance their own stature and reputation as well as that of the college through strategic thought leadership shared on digital platforms.** There are examples of each president posting publicly about issues in higher education including climate change, DACA students and poverty. As the interviews revealed, each president varies in terms of comfort level when it comes to taking a stand on controversial topics. Their social media and publicly available emails confirm the different approaches each leader takes. President A posted on Twitter, “Solving for poverty is the single most important issue in modern society. If your industry isn’t dedicated to doing its part, I have one question: why not?” President B posted an expression of pride that the Board of Trustees approved a climate plan for the college to be carbon neutral by 2035. President C does not tend to use social media for thought leadership but instead prefers to speak directly to the community on issues via email. And President D’s social media reflected what was explained in the interviews. This participant’s approach is to have clearly articulated set of values that are reinforced to the community versus weighing in on every controversy facing the country.

### **Summary**

The data gathered from the semi-structured interviews presented the following seven key findings: 1) Digital engagement is an essential part of a college president’s job; 2) Presidential digital engagement allows community members and stakeholders unprecedented access to the university leader; 3) Digital engagement gives a president the ability to meet community members’ needs in a variety of ways even when they are away from campus; 4) Presidents have

a unique opportunity to create powerful bonds online; 5) Even presidents with limited interest or time for digital engagement can make essential shared emotional connections; 6) Given the rapid nature of digital communication, presidents can protect their institutions and perceptions of their leadership through connections made before, during and after a controversy; and 7) Presidents can enhance their own stature and reputation as well as that of the college through strategic thought leadership shared on digital platforms.

Document analyses, which included more than 750 posts of digital content pages available publicly online, were also conducted to triangulate the data garnered from the interviews and validated the findings from the interviews. The following chapter will examine these seven themes in the context of the conceptual framework and provide recommendations for practice and future research.

## **CHAPTER V: SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The purpose of this multiple-case study was to determine how presidential digital engagement impacts the sense of community among stakeholders at institutions of higher education. This multiple-case study included interviews with presidents and senior leaders at four institutions of higher education. The presidents have been recognized by another scholar for their acumen with social media (Ahlquist, 2017). The data obtained from their interviews offered insight into best practices and explained how a president's digital engagement can foster a sense of community with stakeholders using the criteria proposed by McMillan and Chavis (1986). To best determine the impact of a president's digital engagement, the researcher also interviewed senior leaders of essential divisions including enrollment management, marketing and communications, and advancement at each of the institutions. A multiple-case study was appropriate for this research question because the researcher sought to explain why a practice is important, which is a key factor when determining the relevancy of a case study (Yin, 2018).

This chapter focuses on the key findings that emerged using two sources of evidence:

1. Fifteen interviews conducted with presidents, senior leaders and staff in enrollment management, marketing and communications, and advancement at four institutions;
2. Document analyses of the publicly available digital communications from four presidents over the course of an academic semester: January 1 through June 1, 2019.

These messages were from the president specifically, not overall university communications or institutional social media channels.

Seven key findings emerged from data analysis, and using McMillan and Chavis' (1986) sense of community theory, these key findings were interpreted. Finally, recommendations for practice, including a capstone project, as well as for future research are presented.

### **Overview of Key Findings**

#### **Key Findings: Interviews**

The following seven themes emerged from the 15 interviews conducted with four college presidents, as well as 11 members of their senior leadership teams and staff members representing three divisions:

#### **1. Digital engagement is an essential part of a college president's job;**

Leaders who do not engage are going to end up sideways by the wayside. We are going to be the persons of yesteryear that so often create leaders who are not nimble and not as successful as they otherwise might be. (D3)

#### **2. Presidential digital engagement allows community members and stakeholders unprecedented access to the institution's leader;**

[The president] is probably the most accessible president; every student has [their] cell phone number. [The president] can text a student...can send them a message, [the president] checks to see what students are doing on Facebook so that they know that [the president's] presence is there and [the president is] watching to see how they're engaging and interacting. (A2)

**3. Digital engagement gives a president the ability to meet community members' needs in a variety of ways;**

[The president] realized that a lot of the students actually needed glasses and they didn't know it. And within I think a week's time, [the president] had either enough money raised or volunteer opportunities for the students to receive the glasses and the eye care that they needed. (A2)

**4. Presidents have a unique opportunity to create powerful bonds online;**

It's striking to me how many alums I meet, sometimes I've even met alums in places unrelated to [name of the college], literally like in an airport or something who recognize me because they've seen videos featuring me. And I think that wouldn't have been the case 20 years ago. I don't think one or two pictures in the alumni magazine have the same effect. And so I think when people actually come up and say like, 'Oh, you know, you're, you're President [name] aren't you? I saw your last video.' You know, that makes you knowable in a way that you wouldn't have been otherwise. (B3)

**5. Even presidents with limited interest or time for digital engagement can make essential shared emotional connections;**

[The president] celebrates...shares and...participates in traditions... athletics victories, which are really popular, groups winning awards, faculty doing great things. I think those things that people care about in terms of, oh, I remember these things from college. [The president]...gives people pride points. I'd say

especially alums, [the president] reminds them of why they should be proud of the university. (C1)

**6. Given the rapid nature of digital communication, presidents can protect their institutions and perceptions of their leadership through connections made before, during and after a controversy and;**

I think it's more business practice now that you have to use it [digital engagement] to make announcements and spread news and amplify what you do. It's strategic. Yes, it makes us particularly transparent. I think it's just if you don't do it these days, that's at your own peril. Keeping quiet is not a good idea. (C2)

**7. Presidents can enhance their own stature and reputation as well as that of the college through strategic thought leadership shared on digital platforms.**

It's a place where you have a voice, where others are paying attention and those others could be your own alumni and your own faculty, but they could just as easily be journalists who are covering higher ed or academics at other institutions. I do think in the media-saturated world in which we live, making smart use of Twitter is a way to become visible among audiences you would like to be visible and doing it in a way that positions you as a thoughtful, engaged person. (B1)

**Key Findings: Document Analysis**

The president's publically available digital communications, including social media posts, videos, and community emails from January 1 to June 1, 2019, were analyzed to corroborate the data collected. These communications were separate from overall university

messaging and main institutional accounts. This data provided rich examples to corroborate the findings:

1. Presidential digital engagement allows community members and stakeholders unprecedented access to the institution's leader; President A was asked on Twitter how to get college-themed gear. The president responded a short time later with an email address to order the gear and wrote, "...tell her you need some gear and that I sent you to her. She'll take care of it."
2. Digital engagement gives a president the ability to meet community members' needs in a variety of ways; President A posted on Instagram about an opportunity for students to get free haircuts. "Just another reason to love our students and [nickname of college]. Every Sunday, one of our students donates his gifts to his peers to make sure everyone's look is on point."
3. Presidents have a unique opportunity to create powerful bonds online; President B posted on Twitter, "Some academic ceremonies are routine, but this one was a FIRST. Today [name of college] was formally awarded charter as Gamma chapter of Alpha Alpha Alpha, an honor society for first-generation college students, and we inducted our first class of honorees!"
4. Even presidents with limited interest or time for digital engagement can make essential shared emotional connections; President D posted on Twitter about commencement, "[College name] graduates, I rest easy knowing the future is in your hands. Congratulations on your extraordinary achievement. Go [mascot name]! Set the world on fire!"



5. Given the rapid nature of digital communication, presidents can protect their institutions and perceptions of their leadership through connections made before, during and after a controversy, and; President C sent a community-wide email after a student posted a photo in blackface on social media. The president denounced the incident and promised a full investigation. “Racist expressions such as these are profoundly offensive and deeply hurtful. They contradict our values as a welcoming and inclusive community....”
6. Presidents can enhance their own stature and reputation as well as that of the college through strategic thought leadership shared on digital platforms. President A posted on Twitter, “Solving for poverty is the single most important issue in modern society. If your industry isn’t dedicated to doing its part, I have one question: why not?”

### **Overall Findings**

When the key findings from the interviews and document analyses were triangulated, the document analysis supported six of the interview findings. The seventh, digital engagement is an essential part of a college president’s job, was discussed so thoroughly during the interviews it is considered an overall finding of the study. Therefore, the following key themes emerged:

1. **Digital engagement is an essential part of a college president’s job;**

Leaders who do not engage are going to end up sideways by the wayside. We are going to be the persons of yesteryear that so often create leaders who are not nimble and not as successful as they otherwise might be. (D3)

2. **Presidential digital engagement allows community members and stakeholders unprecedented access to the institution’s leader;**

[The president] is probably the most accessible president; every student has [the president's] cell phone number. [They] can text a student...can send them a message, [the president] checks to see what students are doing on Facebook so that they know that [the president's] presence is there and [is] watching to see how they're engaging and interacting. (A2)

**3. Digital engagement gives a president the ability to meet community members' needs in a variety of ways;**

[The president] realized that a lot of the students actually needed glasses and they didn't know it. And within I think a week's time, [the president] had either enough money raised or volunteer opportunities for the students to receive the glasses and the eye care that they needed. (A2)

**4. Presidents have a unique opportunity to create powerful bonds online;**

It's striking to me how many alums I meet, sometimes I've even met alums in places unrelated to [college name], literally like in an airport or something who recognize me because they've seen videos featuring me. And I think that wouldn't have been the case 20 years ago. I don't think one or two pictures in the alumni magazine have the same effect. And so I think when people actually come up and say like, 'Oh, you know, you're, you're President [name] aren't you? I saw your last video.' You know, that makes you knowable in a way that you wouldn't have been otherwise. (B3)

**5. Even presidents with limited interest or time for digital engagement can make essential shared emotional connections;**

[The president] celebrates...shares and...participates in traditions... athletics victories, which are really popular, groups winning awards, faculty doing great things. I think those things that people care about in terms of, oh, I remember these things from college. [The president]...gives people pride points. I'd say especially alums, [the president] reminds them of why they should be proud of the university. (C1)

6. **Given the rapid nature of digital communication, presidents can protect their institutions and perceptions of their leadership through connections made before, during and after a controversy and;**

I think it's more business practice now that you have to use it to make announcements and spread news and amplify what you do. It's strategic. Yes, it makes us particularly transparent. I think it's just if you don't do it these days, that's at your own peril. Keeping quiet is not a good idea. (C2)

7. **Presidents can enhance their own stature and reputation as well as that of the college through strategic thought leadership shared on digital platforms.**

It's a place where you have a voice, where others are paying attention and those others could be your own alumni and your own faculty, but they could just as easily be journalists who are covering higher ed or academics at other institutions. I do think in the media-saturated world in which we live, making smart use of Twitter is a way to become visible among audiences you would like to be visible and doing it in a way that positions you as a thoughtful, engaged person. (B1)

### **Interpretation of Findings**

The theoretical framework used to ground this study is the sense of community theory (McMillan & Chavis, 1986), which proposed a definition with four domains. The first element is membership; in this case the connection that various stakeholders feel toward the institution of higher education. Members feel a sense of belonging and relatedness to other students, faculty, staff and alumni. The second element is influence; stakeholders have a sense that they matter and make a difference to the college or university. The third element is reinforcement; this is the sense that community members' needs will be met by the institution because they are a valued part of the college or university. The last criteria is a shared emotional connection; this suggests that members share history, common places, time together and similar experiences (McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

The research confirmed that digital engagement is a powerful tool for presidents to use to create and reinforce a sense of community among stakeholders. Seventy-two percent of adults in the United States use a social media site; that number soars to 90% of those ages 18 to 29 (Auxier et al., 2019). Eighty-one percent of U.S. adults reported owning a smartphone and an increasing number of them use it as their primary way of accessing online content (Auxier et al., 2019). Given the widespread usage of digital devices, Moreno (2017) argued institutions of higher education must engage with stakeholders on those devices by delivering relevant messaging at the appropriate time, in the appropriate manner. As outlined by McMillan and Chavis (1986), membership means that there are people who belong to the community and those who do not. In the interviews, one president observed that some of the most engaging social media posts focused on good-natured teasing about the institution's biggest sports rivalry. These

posts are not just getting “likes”, they are reinforcing the concept that: “...one fits in the group and has a place there, a feeling of acceptance by the group, and a willingness to sacrifice for the group” (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p. 10). That is the very essence of “school spirit” that might have once been solely the domain of a large in-person pep rally or sporting event, but now can be fostered virtually and by an institution’s leader. Institutions of higher education are complex organizations with many stakeholders that can each be considered essential in terms of recruiting and retaining students, recruiting and retaining faculty and staff, raising financial support beyond tuition, and ensuring strong community support for the college or university mission (Weary, 2009).

When considering the second tenet of the four domains of the sense of community theory, influence, McMillan and Chavis (1986) argued, “The group member believes that either directly or indirectly he or she can exert some control over the community” (p. 12). In fact, the scholars argued, “members are more attracted to a community in which they feel that they are influential” (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p. 12). For tuition-dependent institutions, this statement simply cannot be ignored as they have a financial need to ensure student enrollment and retention for the revenue it provides. One president suggested that digital engagement allows them to better understand the needs of the students. “I tell people all the time, to be an effective leader you have to shut up and listen. You really, really do. People will tell you everything that they need and everything that you need to know about what they need.” (A3) Digital engagement is an important way to get feedback from stakeholders with 83% of colleges and universities using analytics for “social listening” (Stoner, 2018). One study recommended that all institutions of higher education should be monitoring online conversations and feedback from stakeholders

(Barnes & Lescault, 2013). Social media monitoring can provide information about potential problems as well as provide important news about students, alumni or faculty (Barnes & Lescault, 2013).

The third element of the sense of community theory is the fulfillment of those needs. McMillan and Chavis (1986) spoke succinctly about this point: "... it is obvious that for any group to maintain a positive sense of togetherness, the individual-group association must be rewarding for its members" (p. 12). The interviews provided rich examples of presidents understanding this concept and reinforcing it through digital engagement. President A used social media to ensure students could get donated eye wear so they could see clearly in class. President C personally sends birthday wishes to individual community members through a digital platform. President B often posts about the social issues that matter most to their community members, including climate change and sustainability. President D, like the others, has taken a strong stand through digital platforms on protecting community members who could be affected by any changes in the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program. Presidents are also called on to respond to world, national and local crises, and some institutions in this study have developed policies to help determine when a statement is appropriate. One recent report suggested presidents consider offering public support to students who champion social justice-related activities (Bowen et al., 2018) as a way to connect with the students they serve while addressing the key issues concerning a campus community.

The final tenet of the sense of community theory emphasizes the importance of shared emotional connection, which was clearly demonstrated in all the presidential digital engagement studied. Since this tenet is so evident in presidential social media, it is perhaps essential to go

through the features McMillan and Chavis (1986) argued are important to this principle. They include the following:

**Contact hypothesis.** The assumption is the more people interact, the more likely they are to develop strong bonds. It is important to note that digital platforms allow for a huge audience of stakeholder to interact regularly. Institutions of higher education should create robust social networks of graduates to strengthen alumni engagement, increase volunteerism and promote giving (Meyers, 2014).

**Quality of interaction.** The authors argued that positive interactions create powerful bonds. This certainly applies to presidential digital engagement and may strengthen the argument that one size does not fit all. Presidents must use their authentic style to create quality digital posts to ensure optimal engagement. Zaiontz' (2015) findings emphasized the importance of authenticity in social media and the opportunity for thought leadership it presents to presidents of higher education institutions. Stakeholders are sophisticated consumers of information and want to see digital engagement that feels less like marketing and more like a true representation of presidents, their views and personalities, as well as the institutions they lead.

**Closure to events.** Interaction should not be ambiguous and the community's task should not go undefined. Presidents must be clear in digital leadership as they would be in any other forum. President C uses community-wide emails to effectively address controversies on campus, often closing with a message of clear instruction to the community: "I condemn this behavior in the most unambiguous terms possible. Racist expressions such as these are profoundly offensive

and deeply hurtful. They contradict our values as a welcoming and inclusive community, and have no place at [name of college].”

**Shared valent event hypothesis.** McMillan and Chavis (1986) stated that the more important the shared event is to the community members, the greater the bond. It is not surprising that these researchers believed crises create opportunities for a community to bond. Digital engagement offers leaders an important outlet to demonstrate clear, decisive leadership particularly in times of crisis. If a leader fails to handle a crisis well and in a timely manner, it can lead to a loss of confidence in the presidency as well as serious damage to the institution’s image and brand (Brennan & Stern, 2017).

**Investment.** This assertion ties presidential digital engagement directly to financial and other types of support for an institution. “...Persons who donate more time and energy to an association will be more emotionally involved” (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p. 14). In this particular study, one senior leader of advancement observed that the president “oftentimes [will] just respond and be proactive in reaching out to donors when there are things happening on campus that [they think] might be interesting to them.” (C3) A simple email from a president to a donor can be an important part of maintaining that shared emotional connection and keep a stakeholder invested in the institution. As noted in the literature review, the Council for Advancement and Support of Education (CASE) recently recognized the University of California at Los Angeles for best practices in alumni relations for its unique digital engagement effort. The campaign was designed around graduates who cannot travel to campus for a typical alumni day. UCLA’s first online alumni day brought the event to graduates virtually with rare looks at places on campus through online tours, quizzes, interaction with faculty experts in real-time



discussions, and a chance to reconnect with fellow alumni via live chat (CASE, 2019). This example highlights the efforts universities are making toward strengthening virtual engagement.

**Effect of honor and humiliation on community members.** This concept more specifically applies to the reward in the presence of community. All of the presidents interviewed used digital platforms to celebrate the accomplishments of faculty, staff, students, and alumni to the wider community. Colleges and universities, including their presidents, can use social media to celebrate successes and demonstrate their ties with members of their community, a concept that pre-dates social media with the word-of-mouth research of Brown and Reingen (1987).

**Spiritual bond.** McMillan and Chavis (1986) surmised that this concept can be present even in secular institutions. An argument can be made that social media hashtags provide a spiritual bond; if a person is a part of the community then they understand immediately the concept behind a social media tag. In this particular study, President A creates and uses social media tags to reinforce the spiritual bond stakeholders experience at the institution. “And I think that resonates with people. People form strong emotional connections really, I would argue, through the use of these hashtags.” (A3) Lovejoy and Saxton (2012) researched non-profits’ use of Twitter and discovered three main purposes, including information, action and community. The community function referred to the use of social media to stimulate conversations among users (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012). The community function also involves the use of digital engagement to encourage the participation of members around what Carpenter et al. (2016) refer to as the “passion points” of an institution.

This research demonstrates that presidential digital engagement cannot be considered merely a communication tool for the moment; it is no longer optional for optimum leadership.

The platforms may evolve and leadership teams must make careful choices about which initiatives deserve resources and investments, but a sense of community has long been important for the success of an institution of higher education. This research shows that digital strategies contribute greatly to reinforcing that sense of community in myriad and limitless ways.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

The overall findings in this multiple-case study grounded by the sense of community theory (McMillan & Chavis, 1986) should provide ample evidence that presidents of higher education institutions must conduct robust digital engagement that should be a part of an institution's overall digital communications strategy. The findings of this research suggest a variety of recommendations for practice:

- 1. College presidents must continue to be educated on the opportunities digital engagement present for both themselves as leaders and for their institutions.** The case must continue to be made to university leaders that the research shows the importance of digital engagement. This type of communication truly is no longer an optional part of a college president's job. The research clearly demonstrates the proliferation of digital communications and the need for leaders to connect with stakeholders in order to build a sense of community an institution of higher education needs. College presidents need to know the research and best practices and then work with senior leaders to invest in technology and personnel for maximum engagement.
- 2. The approach to presidential digital engagement should be tailored to the leader.** It is vitally important that college presidents understand that digital engagement should be as unique as any other facet of their administration. These are important communication

channels, but a leader's approach to them can be tailored to the individual's style and personality. Senior leaders should help provide opportunities that align with the leader's approach to overall communication and consideration must be given to the expectations of the institution's board of trustees.

- 3. College marketing teams should work with the president to tailor digital engagement strategies around both the leader's style and the institution's needs.** It is evident in this particular study that the college presidents who participated take vastly different approaches to communication. Those differences should be celebrated because they meet the differing needs of each institution. Marketing teams should develop strategies for presidential digital engagement aligned with the unique needs of the institution. Those needs may include driving enrollment, increased visibility or creating a culture of philanthropy. Presidential digital engagement is not merely a box to check; it must be part of advancing an institution's strategic goals.
- 4. College marketing teams should recognize that video will continue to be an increasingly important component part of communication's strategy and efforts should be made to ensure presidents embrace this opportunity and receive appropriate on-camera training.** Speaking on camera does not necessarily come naturally to most people and presidents should receive media training as part of their onboarding process. It is important that leaders become comfortable communicating on the platforms used by so many of the stakeholders in a university community.
- 5. College marketing teams should consider dedicating staff members to focus solely on presidential digital engagement beyond what the university's central communications staff produces for overall messaging.** A leader's unique voice should

be heard in myriad ways both to advance the goals of the institution as well as to protect and enhance its reputation. College marketing teams should work with other divisions to ensure the president's stature is bolstered by targeted communications efforts. Social listening must be an important part of that strategy to ensure senior leaders understand perceptions of a president's leadership and the institution overall.

- 6. Professional organizations should ensure presidents have access to the latest research and opportunities for digital engagement training and coaching.** Many of the presidents in this study discussed the importance of digital engagement as they assumed their roles. There are numerous organizations that offer new college presidents training opportunities; that training must include sessions on the importance and the mechanics of digital engagement. Media and on-camera training should also be included in any workshops for new college presidents.

### **Capstone**

The capstone project seeks to provide a unique solution to address a problem of practice, which has grounded the research study (Regis College Department of Education, 2017). After three years of studying this problem of practice, this researcher believes there is a need for further education among higher education leaders specific to the importance of presidential digital engagement. Based on the format of most conferences, a PowerPoint presentation would be the most appropriate mode of presenting the research.

The PowerPoint presentation included relevant highlights from the literature review, including a description of the problem of practice as well as an explanation of the sense of community theory. The presentation included an overview of the research methodology,

including the criteria for participation and the data collection process. Slides in the presentation detailed the semi-structured interview questions, followed by relevant quotations from the participants as well as from the document analysis of the presidents' digital engagement.

The presentation was titled "Staying on the ground floor: Presidential digital engagement is an opportunity not a task." The researcher plans to approach two well-known programs that sponsor new president orientations and offer to present these findings. The researcher would offer a workshop-style event that would include time for discussion and questions.

In the future, the presentation could be adjusted to focus on training for leaders in each of the three areas included in this study: enrollment management, advancement, and marketing and communications. The slides would be tailored to each audience and could be presented at conferences specifically for those divisions. This study was enhanced by those various viewpoints, therefore it is important to ensure the data is shared widely for maximum impact on practice.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Based on the findings of this multiple-case study, there are five suggested areas for future research:

1. **How can higher education presidents better mirror company CEOs in digital engagement strategies.** A multiple-case study design could examine the digital engagement strategies of a corporation as well as the president of a college or university. Each should be approximately the same size in terms of employees and scope of service,

meaning a national, local or regional institution. The sense of community theory could similarly ground this type of study.

2. **How does presidential digital engagement at a tuition-dependent institution compare to a highly selective one?** One participant suggested in the interview that presidential digital engagement is more important for tuition-dependent institutions; this is an observation that is worthy of further study. The research design could be similar to the one for this current study and include a multiple-case study grounded by the sense of community theory. Questions in the semi-structure interview guide would focus more on the unique differences that exist between these two types of institutions.
3. **The COVID-19 global pandemic and its impacts on higher education could provide material for a case study on presidential digital engagement.** Higher education has been tested and will continue to be impacted by this deadly virus; it would provide an interesting case study in presidential digital engagement especially since that has become the only type of engagement allowed at the height of the crisis. A researcher could replicate this exact study and focus on the impact of this crisis. How did presidents use digital engagement to foster a sense of community when digital engagement was the only type of engagement available?
4. **A researcher could focus more on the concept of authenticity and presidential digital engagement.** A question arose during this multiple-case study regarding the definition of authentic or genuine digital engagement. Presidents routinely use speechwriters, yet there was heated discussion in interviews about the use of writers to create material for social media. This issue is worthy of further study.

5. **Consider alternative research methodologies.** Although the case study is appropriate to determine why a practice is important (Yin, 2018), it may be beneficial to consider a mixed methods approach utilizing the data analytics available for most digital communications channels to explore why some types of messaging yield higher engagement. Nearly every social media platform and email messaging software offer analytics to determine views, clicks and other data points. This data combined with interviews and document analysis could provide compelling insight into the effectiveness of types of presidential digital engagement in terms of fostering a sense of community.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

One president in the study had recently seen the Broadway phenomenon “Hamilton” and referenced it when asked about the importance of digital communication. “The people are asking you to lead. They want to hear your voice, you have to communicate with them and it’s easy to get those messages out.” (A3) This president and others correctly assert that leaders who do not embrace digital engagement miss essential opportunities to connect with stakeholders at the institutions they serve.

As higher education evolves with the economic realities and the changing needs of students, so must communications practices. Over the past three years being immersed in this topic as both a doctoral student and a practitioner, it is abundantly clear that presidential digital engagement is an essential part of the modern presidency. However, there is room for a broad interpretation of how that manifests for each president in each institution. There are best practices to consider, but senior teams must support the style of the institution’s leader while continuing to stay up-to-date on best practices in this field as well as other industries. Current

and future leaders must understand that communication strategies should focus on the platforms where the majority of their consumers communicate. It's that simple. That being said, presidents must not forget to take a walk around campus and interact with community members face-to-face when possible. That clearly still matters for presidents who want to foster a sense of community in this digital age.



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## APPENDIX A-Email to participants

June 26, 2019

President

Dear Dr.:

My name is Kelley Tuthill and I am a doctoral student enrolled in the EdD Higher Education Leadership program at Regis College in Weston, Massachusetts. I have successfully defended my dissertation proposal and received IRB approval. I am now reaching out to prospective institutions to serve as research sites for my work this summer.

My research will focus on the role of presidential digital engagement in fostering a sense of community. I am asking for your institution's participation because you have been singled out by researcher Dr. Josie Ahlquist in her lists of higher education leaders to follow on social media. My dissertation will be a qualitative multi-site case study that will seek to determine the importance of a president's digital engagement. The methodology for my study will involve a series of interviews with presidents and senior leaders, ideally representing communications and marketing, enrollment, and advancement/alumni affairs. The interviews would be conducted by phone over the summer and require little preparation other than reflection on how presidential digital engagement (video, email, blogs and social media) impacts stakeholders.

If you have preliminary interest in my research topic and want to learn more about what might be involved please contact me at [kelleytuthill@regiscollege.edu](mailto:kelleytuthill@regiscollege.edu). I would be happy to share more information with you about the details of my study. I will also plan on following up with you by phone within the next week.

Thank you in advance for your consideration of this request.

Sincerely,

*Kelley Tuthill*

Kelley Tuthill

[Kelley.tuthill@regiscollege.edu](mailto:Kelley.tuthill@regiscollege.edu)

617-834-3469

## APPENDIX B-Questionnaire

# Presidential Digital Engagement

Screening survey for marketing and communications leaders

1. What types of digital engagement does your president conduct with stakeholders? Mark all that apply.

- Facebook post
- Twitter posts
- Instagram posts
- LinkedIn posts
- Snapchat
- Blogs
- Videos
- Email communication

2. How important is presidential digital engagement to the institution's overall marketing and communication strategy?

- Extremely important
- Somewhat important
- Neutral
- Somewhat not important

- Extremely not important

How important is presidential digital engagement to reinforcing stakeholders' sense of belonging to the university community?

- Extremely important
- Somewhat important
- Neutral
- Somewhat not important
- Extremely not important

4. How important is presidential digital engagement to stakeholders' sense of mattering to the university community?

- Extremely important
- Somewhat important
- Neutral
- Somewhat not important
- Extremely not important

5. How important is presidential digital engagement in terms of stakeholders' sense their needs will be met by the institution?

- Extremely important
- Somewhat important
- Neutral
- Somewhat not important

Extremely not important

6. How important is presidential digital engagement to reinforcing stakeholders' shared emotional connection to the institution?

Extremely important

Somewhat important

Neutral

Somewhat not important

Extremely not important

7. Does the president utilize digital platforms to respond to campus controversies?

Yes

No

Maybe

8. Does the president use digital platforms to comment on national and international controversies?

Yes

No

Maybe

9. Does the president utilize digital platforms to comment on local, national and international disasters?

Yes

No

Maybe

Who composes the president's digital messaging? Check all that apply.

- The president
- Marketing/communications team
- Alumni/development team
- Outside firm
- President's office staff
- Other

11. How do you believe the president's digital engagement impacts stakeholders? Check all that apply

- A sense of transparency
- Reinforcement of university mission
- A sense of belonging
- A shared emotional connection to the institution
- Confidence in the president's leadership

## **APPENDIX C-Informed Consent Form**

### **Regis College EdD Program**

### **Informed Consent to participate in “The Role of Presidential Digital Engagement in Fostering a Sense of Community Among Stakeholders” study**

**Researcher: Kelley Tuthill**

#### **Introduction**

Please read this form carefully. You are being asked to participate in a research study regarding the role presidential digital engagement plays in fostering a sense of community. You were selected to participate in this study because your president has been cited in previous research as a leader in social media best practices. Please ask any questions you may have before you agree to participate in the study.

#### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to determine how presidential digital engagement impacts the sense of community among stakeholders at institutions of higher education. This study will benefit college and university presidents as well as those who work in higher education marketing and communications, enrollment and advancement. The larger impact, however, will be on the sustainability of higher education at large. Colleges and universities need strong community engagement and participation to thrive. Engaged students, parents, alumni, donors, faculty and staff are all essential to creating a culture of academic excellence, philanthropy and longevity. In this era of declining enrollments and campus closures, this study will examine the importance of the role of the president in engaging the stakeholders needed to ensure an institution of higher education is sustainable in an increasingly digital world.

#### **Description of Study Details**

If you agree to participate in this study, a representative of your institution will be asked to complete an initial screening questionnaire. Four members of the institution’s leadership team will be asked to participate in interviews via Zoom for approximately 30-45 minutes each. Participants include the college or university president, as well as leaders from the following divisions: marketing and communications, advancement and enrollment.



### **Benefits of Being in this Study**

The benefits of being in this study are to enhance understanding of the importance of presidential digital engagement. This study is timely because the number of high school seniors is declining, which means institutions must sharpen their messaging in an increasingly competitive environment. This research has the potential to add to the knowledge of best practices and determine what strategies will be most effective in the future and more importantly why this is important. This research will help guide higher education presidents and leaders to best practices in an ever-changing digital landscape.

### **Risks and Discomforts of Being in this Study**

The study has no foreseeable risks beyond what the participant experiences in daily life. Participants may experience discomfort or stress when finding time in their schedules for the interview.

### **Payments**

There is no payment for being in this study.

### **Cost**

There is no cost to you for being in this research study other than the valuable time you generously donate toward this project.

### **Choosing to participate in the Study and Choosing to Quit the Study**

It is your choice to participate in this study. If you choose not to participate in this study, it will not affect your current or future relations with Regis. You are free to decline to answer questions or quit at any time, for any reason. There is no penalty for not taking part or for quitting.

### **Getting Dismissed from the Study**

The researcher may dismiss you from the study at any time should there be any unforeseen circumstances for either the researcher or the institution.

### **Privacy**

The records of this study will be kept private. This study is anonymous and the researcher will avoid identifying institutions or personnel. Research records will be kept on a password-protected computer in a locked office. The third-party transcription service will be required to sign a non-disclosure agreement. No published reports will include any information that will make it possible to identify you.

### **Contacts and Questions**

The researcher conducting this study is: Kelley Tuthill. The researcher will be available to answer any questions about the study at: 781-768-7244 or [kelley.tuthill@regiscollege.edu](mailto:kelley.tuthill@regiscollege.edu). If you have questions or concerns about your rights, you may contact the Regis Institutional Review Board Chair:

**Dr. Colleen C. Malachowski, PhD**

**781-768-7373**

**[colleen.malachowski@regiscollege.edu](mailto:colleen.malachowski@regiscollege.edu)**

### **Statement of Consent**

I have read this form (or have had it read to me). I have been encouraged to ask questions. I have received answers to my questions. I give my consent to participate in this study. I understand the risks and discomforts associated with the above study and understand that I may quit the study at any time without penalty.

I agree to be audio and/or video recorded (Check One):  Yes  No

### **Signature(s)/Date**

Participant Printed Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Participant Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX D-Interview Guide

**Research question:** This study seeks to answer the following research question: How do college presidents leverage digital communications to foster a sense of community among stakeholders?

For the purpose of this study, digital engagement is defined as the process of delivering relevant communications at the right time, in the right manner to key stakeholders. Ideally this is accomplished across a number of platforms (Moreno, 2017).

This interview guide will be prefaced by asking one participant from each institution to complete a questionnaire to gather information prior to the interviews.

1. Describe the ways in which you (your president) use digital forms of communications to engage with key stakeholders.

Follow up: Which platforms do you find most effective? Can you highlight an example of a particularly successful presidential digital post/email/video/photo?

2. How do you feel about the concept of digital engagement as an essential part of a college president's job?

Follow up: Do you feel you (the president) were well prepared for the challenges of digital engagement? How do you (the president) make digital engagement a priority in your (his/her) busy schedule?

3. My research is grounded by the Sense of Community Theory which has four elements. Let's start with the first one, which is membership or the feeling of belonging. How does your (your president's) digital engagement create a feeling of belonging among key stakeholders (will tailor this to each VP)?

Follow up: Our country and communities are divided in many ways and on many issues. Do you struggle with the right messaging particularly on controversial issues? Do you have a post/photo/email or video you regret?

4. The second element is influence, which is defined as a sense of mattering or making a difference to the community. How does your (your president's) digital engagement foster a sense of influence among key stakeholders (will tailor this to each VP)?

Follow up: Do you believe presidents can use digital communication platforms to create a sense of transparency about their administrations? How essential is presidential digital communication to crisis management?

5. The third element focuses on the feeling that community members needs will be met by their membership in your university community. How does your (your president's) digital engagement foster a sense that the university will meet the needs of key stakeholders (will tailor this to each VP)?

Follow up: Our community members have so many different needs, is it truly possible for presidents to be inclusive in their digital communications?

6. The final element is shared emotional connection, the belief that members share history, common places, experiences and traditions. How does your (your president's) digital engagement foster a sense of emotional connection among key stakeholders (will tailor this to each VP)?

Follow up: Could you provide examples of particular posts, videos, emails or photos that helped to reinforce a sense of emotional connection among your community members?

7. What advice would you give to a president who is resistant to digital engagement?
8. Thank you for your time. Is there anything you would like to add that I did not ask?

**APPENDIX F-NVivo Nodes Interviews**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Sources</b>	<b>References</b>
1. Essential part of the job	Importance of presidential digital engagement	12	31
2. Unprecedented access to leader	Digital engagement allows easier access to a college president	8	14
3. Meeting community members needs	Presidents can use digital engagement to be responsive to the community	10	15
4. Create powerful bonds	Presidents can make connections virtually	11	30
5.Shared emotional connection	Presidents can use digital engagement to enhance connection stakeholders feel to university.	10	22
6. Staying ahead of controversies	Presidents can protect their institutions and perceptions of leadership	6	12
7. Thought leadership	Thought leadership can enhance president's reputation as well as institution's	11	33

**APPENDIX G-NVivo Nodes Document Analysis**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Sources</b>	<b>References</b>
1. Unprecedented access to leader	Digital engagement allows easier access to a college president	4	78
3. Meeting community members needs	Presidents can use digital engagement to be responsive to the community	4	115
4. Create powerful bonds	Presidents can make connections virtually	4	120
5. Shared emotional connection	Presidents can use digital engagement to enhance connection stakeholders feel to university.	4	156
6. Staying ahead of controversies	Presidents can protect their institutions and perceptions of leadership	4	12
7. Thought leadership	Thought leadership can enhance president's reputation as well as institution's	3	58

**APPENDIX H-Capstone Presentation**

**Staying on the ground floor:  
Presidential digital engagement  
is an opportunity not a task**

Kelley Tuthill

Vice President of Marketing and Communications

