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**Leading at the Crossroads: Understanding How Identity  
Influences Presidential Communication for Black  
Community College Presidents**

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**Abstract:** Research on leadership is historically biased, with little consideration for different experiences of leaders of color. In this study, we applied the integrated race and leadership framework (Ospina & Foldy, 2009) and utilized a case study approach focused on the context of institutional communication to analyze the experiences of six Black community college presidents. The study was guided by the overarching question of how

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racial identity guided what and how presidents communicated. Our findings indicate that these presidents of color viewed their communication through a social justice lens, while also recognizing their responsibility to the institution. Five themes were identified that highlight the strategies and approaches these presidents take when communicating to their campus, including: 1) a consciousness of who is listening, 2) a sense of racial battle fatigue, 3) a focus on local impact, 4) connection and support from the community, and 5) the skill of racial and social adaptation.

**Keywords:** college president; leadership; social justice; communication

**Liderar en la encrucijada: Comprender cómo la identidad influye en la comunicación presidencial para los presidentes negros de colegios comunitarios**

**Resumen:** La investigación sobre liderazgo tiene poca consideración por las diferentes experiencias de los líderes de color. En este estudio, aplicamos el marco integrado de raza y liderazgo (Ospina & Foldy, 2009) y utilizamos un enfoque de estudio de caso centrado en el contexto de la comunicación institucional para analizar las experiencias de seis presidentes negros de colegios comunitarios. El estudio se basó en la cuestión general de cómo la identidad racial guiaba qué y cómo se comunicaban los presidentes. Nuestros hallazgos indican que estos presidentes de color vieron su comunicación a través de una lente de justicia social, al mismo tiempo que reconocían su responsabilidad con la institución. Se identificaron cinco temas que resaltan las estrategias y enfoques que estos presidentes adoptan cuando se comunican con su campus, que incluyen: 1) una conciencia de quién está escuchando, 2) una sensación de fatiga por la batalla racial, 3) un enfoque en el impacto local, 4) la conexión y apoyo de la comunidad, y 5) la habilidad de adaptación racial y social.

**Palabras clave:** presidente de colegio; liderazgo; justicia social; comunicación

**Liderando na encruzilhada: Entendendo como a identidade influencia a comunicação presidencial para presidentes negros de faculdades comunitárias**

**Resumo:** A pesquisa sobre liderança não leva em consideração as diferentes experiências de líderes negros. Neste estudo, aplicamos a estrutura integrada de raça e liderança (Ospina & Foldy, 2009) e utilizamos uma abordagem de estudo de caso focada no contexto da comunicação institucional para analisar as experiências de seis presidentes negros de faculdades comunitárias. O estudo foi guiado pela questão abrangente de como a identidade racial orientava o que e como os presidentes se comunicavam. Nossos resultados indicam que esses presidentes de cor viam sua comunicação através de uma lente de justiça social, ao mesmo tempo que reconheciam sua responsabilidade para com a instituição. Cinco temas foram identificados que destacam as estratégias e abordagens que esses presidentes adotam ao se comunicarem com seu campus, incluindo: 1) uma consciência de quem está ouvindo, 2) uma sensação de fadiga da batalha racial, 3) um foco no impacto local, 4) conexão e apoio da comunidade; e 5) habilidade de adaptação racial e social.

**Palavras-chave:** presidente da faculdade; liderança; justiça social; comunicação

## Introduction

Many scholars and practitioners have discussed the difficult role of leading colleges and universities (e.g., Kerr, 1970, 1997; Martin & Samels, 2004). Given the multitude of stakeholders that presidents report to (McNaughtan et al., 2018), the various expected skills (Gagliardi et al., 2017), and the increased visibility of their actions (Powers & Schloss, 2017), it is not surprising turnover (both voluntary and involuntary) in the college presidency has been a consistent challenge in higher education (Harris & Ellis, 2018; Langbert, 2012; McNaughtan, 2017). In the last decade, the increased emphasis on communication has added to the plight of the college president, with many finding themselves ill-prepared to engage with their diverse stakeholders (McNaughtan & McNaughtan, 2019).

Presidential challenges are exacerbated at community colleges due to declining state financial support resulting in an increased administrative burden on the president. Though financial support has consistently declined, state and federal lawmakers have increased their expectations for student outcomes, such as, retention and graduation rate (Century Foundation, 2019; McNaughtan, 2018). In addition to the general burden that presidents at community colleges face, presidents of color endure additional hardships when compared to White presidents. For example, microaggressions and acts of racism from campus and community members alike can be challenging to presidents of color, especially at predominantly White institutions (PWI) in the United States (Jones, 2019; Mickles, 2005; Smith, 2004). While there is no shortage of research on leadership in higher education, there is a need for additional work that provides insight into the lived experiences of leaders of color in higher education (Ospina & Foldy, 2009; Pendakur & Furr, 2016), specifically those who are university presidents at PWIs.

In this study, we focused on the context of institutional communication to understand how serving as a president of color influenced decision making. Utilizing a case study approach (Creswell, 2013, 2014), we analyzed interviews with six Black community college presidents from across the country focusing on how their racialized identities influenced personal perceptions about communication decisions. Our work was guided by the integrated race and leadership framework (Ospina & Foldy, 2009) with focus on understanding: 1) how presidential racial identity guided what presidents chose to communicate about and 2) how presidents of African descent perceived their identities to influence how their messages were crafted. Our findings indicate that presidents of color view their communication through a social justice lens, while also recognizing their responsibility to the institution. Five themes were identified based on interviews with six presidents that highlighted the strategies and approaches these presidents take when communicating to their campus.

## Background

Historically, the college presidency in the US has been filled by White men late in their career (Gagliardi et al., 2017). Over the last two decades, there has been approximately an 11% increase in the number of presidents of color with gains made in every racial category (Gagliardi et al., 2017). However, much of that growth has occurred at community colleges (Gasman et al., 2015; McNaughtan, 2018), and the number of students of color attending higher education has increased at a much faster rate. Table 1 presents a breakdown of the number and proportion of college presidents at two-year institutions who completed the College Presidents Survey conducted by the American Council on Education.

**Table 1**

*Racial Diversity at Two-Year Institutions according to the American Council on Education College President's Survey*

Year	White		Black		Hispanic		Other	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
1986	745	91.4	31	3.9	17	3.1	8	1.6
2002	266	89.0	13	4.4	7	2.3	13	4.3
2006	538	83.5	38	5.9	30	5.6	32	4.9
2011	432	84.5	26	5.1	24	4.7	28	5.5
2016	373	80.0	41	8.8	22	4.7	30	6.4

Despite significant efforts of national organizations to advocate for, and develop presidents of color, there are still many barriers in place that hinder their career progression (Alexander, 2010; Ballenger, 2010; Williams, 2013). Even once the presidential position is obtained, significant additional challenges exist for presidents of color (Owens, 2009; Raines, 2017). In a report commissioned by the American Council on Education, Williams (2013) argues that the lack of diversity is not only a moral and social problem, but that lack of diversity has also limited the innovative capacity of higher education institutions, as leaders have lacked important perspectives and made decisions without representative voices from all campus constituents. Evidence for the importance of diversity exists in research where, diversity has been found to be associated with more effective organizations as new perspectives are introduced (Gompers & Kovvali, 2018; Hewlett et al., 2013). As the demographics of college-age students are shifting to a “majority-minority” the need for increased representation of minority leaders has become more critical to ensure that diverse experiences are considered, yet most institutions have seen minimal gains in diversifying executive roles in general, let alone in higher education’s highest office (Cohen et al., 2014; Kezar, 2010; McNaughtan, 2018; Reddick et al., 2011).

### **Presidential Communication**

The expectation for presidents to communicate effectively, accurately, and in a timely manner has increased over the last decade (Gagliardi et al., 2017; McNaughtan et al., 2018). Further, institutional leaders face increasingly volatile and complex issues including sexual assault, racially charged hate crimes, and financial scandals (Harris & Ellis, 2018; Potok, 2017). Despite the increasing expectations for presidential communication and the complexity of presidential challenges, our understanding of what informs presidents communication processes is limited (McNaughtan & McNaughtan, 2019).

Much of the scholarship on presidential communication focuses on times when presidents have chosen to communicate. For example, Gioia & Chittipeddi (1996) studied what drove how and why presidents communicated during times of strategic change. They argue that presidents become sense-givers to their constituents in these times and utilized institutional values and the perceptions of the members of the executive team to inform communication (Gioia & Thomas, 1996). Eddy (2003) similarly discussed the role of the president in helping members of the institutional

community to understand both institutional decisions (i.e., strategic change) and events happening on and around campus. This role as sensegiver is critical to the sensemaking process of campus constituents (Weick, 1995) and is the mechanism presidents use to direct the conversation on their campus and influence how events are perceived (Eddy, 2005; Legon et al., 2013).

McNaughtan et al. (2018) in a study focused on presidential response to the contentious 2016 U.S. presidential election of Donald Trump, found that university presidents focused their messages on civic dialogue, unity, institutional values, and services offered to students, likely in an attempt to calm constituents and influence behavior. Other scholars focused on specific events have illustrated how presidents are crafting their communication. For example, in a study on the 2008-2009 economic crisis that was “felt at all levels of university and university life” (p. 475), Vitullo and Johnson (2010) analyzed the many communications available and found that institutional leaders felt their response was needed to inform constituents on how the changing economic environment would impact the institution and individual faculty, staff, and students.

In addition to supporting constituents, McNaughtan and McNaughtan (2019) posited that presidents generally communicate in order to respond to campus stakeholders needs or challenges, appease external communities, and emphasize university values. Each of these motivators illustrates that communications from presidents are deliberately crafted with specific objectives. Building on this work, another study focused on the role of mission statements in communication posited that presidents utilized these documents when deciding not only when to communicate, but also in the crafting of those communications (McNaughtan et al., 2019). This level of intentionality is somewhat surprising given the increasing frequency of presidential communication and the often lamented ineffectiveness of institutional mission statements.

Statements from presidents on racial incidents have also been analyzed with findings indicating that presidents tend to refrain from addressing racial incidents in a way that calls into question the systemic underpinnings of the incident (Davis & Harris, 2016). Further, Cole and Harper (2017) analyzed presidential responses to racially charged incidents and similarly found that presidents would address the racial incident, but that they did not address the systemic issues associated with incident. This lack of depth in responses, scholars have argued hinders the effect of the statement on preventing future incidents (Cole & Harper, 2017; Squire et al., 2019).

While our understanding of how and why presidents communicate has increased, there is little research that can inform how presidential experiences or identities, in connection to their institutional context, influence presidential communication. This work is needed as the presidency continues to diversify (McNaughtan, 2017; Williams, 2013), and the complexity of presidential leadership continues to intensify.

### **Racial Identity and Leadership**

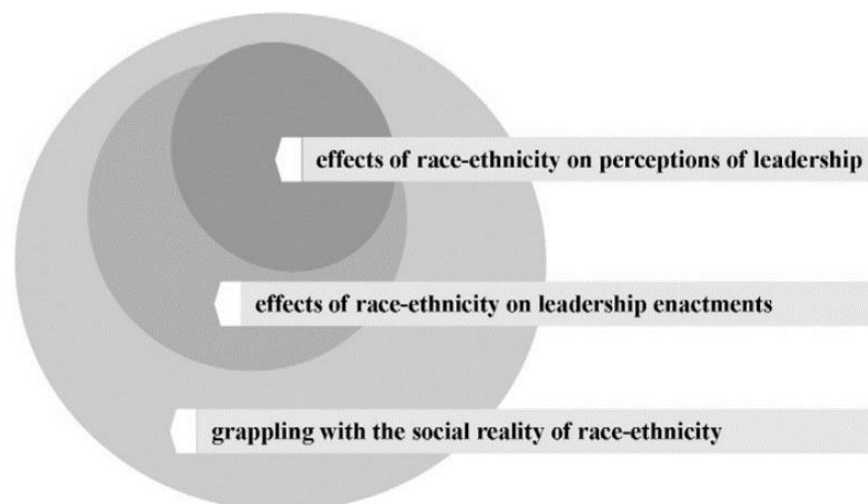
The majority of scholarship focused on the role of racial identity in leadership is discussed from a deficit perspective, where race is associated with added difficulties (Ospina & Foldy, 2009). This deficit perspective focuses on the White Institutional Presence (Gusa, 2010), which in the instance of Black students (or faculty, staff, and administrators) serves to marginalize, erase, and oppress their epistemological perspectives due to White ascendancy, monoculturalism, White estrangement, and White blindness. Even in scholarship analyzing the career paths of leaders of color, findings indicate significant oppression and added challenges when compared to their White counterparts (Jones, 2012). This deficit perspective has highlighted numerous opportunities for structural change within higher education to support the development and work of presidents of color, such as increased professional opportunities, national roundtables, new professional associations, and more focused research on this population (Wolfe & Freeman, 2013).

Wolfe and Dilworth (2015) argued that much of the deficit mindset is couched in structural racism. They posited that the only way to increase the representation of leaders of color, and subsequently support them is to not only inform institutional stakeholders of the experiences of leaders of color, but to also change how institutions enact recruitment, retention, and assessment of leaders of color. For persons of African descent this particular deficit framing is not limited to the institutional context and extends into the larger society where the effects of racism adversely impact the psychological, physiological and behavioral responses of Black people (Sue et al., 2008; Sue et al., 2007). To illustrate, when Black students and faculty endure extended exposure to racism, racial battle fatigue (RBF; Smith et al., 2016) can emerge in gendered nuanced ways that harm both Black men and women (Hotchkins, 2017; Smith et al., 2007). Gonzales et al. (2018) argue that higher education institutions should “reimagine” how diversity efforts are studied, arguing that current organizational theories and perspectives are often insufficient and lack a critical approach. While there is much work on the challenges leaders of color face (Gonzales et al., 2018; Ospina & Foldy, 2009), additional insight is needed to understand how leaders of color consider their identities in predominantly White institutional (PWI) spaces.

## **Theoretical Framework**

Research and theories focused on leadership are fraught with cultural bias and are typically constructed without consideration for the context (i.e., identities, past experiences, connection to the community) of the leader (Bordas, 2007). Some scholars have called for further development of more integrated theories through the use of critical race theory (Wolfe & Dilworth, 2015) or other critical paradigms to adjust organizational theories (Gonzales et al., 2018; Kezar, 2008). The integrated theoretical framework for leadership, which was put forward by Ospina and Foldy (2009), provides one approach for understanding the connection between leadership roles and the experience of being a president of color. In a review of the research that focused on the intersection of leadership and race, Ospina and Foldy (2009) found three intersecting concepts that informed the relationship between race and leadership (see Figure 1). The first concept they posit is that race effects perceptions of leadership generally. Highlighting literature from management scholars, Ospina and Foldy (2009) illustrate this point by presenting examples of research that constituents’ perspectives of their leaders were associated with their race. Some of these studies discussed how these perceptions led to specific barriers and challenges that leaders of color endured, such as, tokenism, macroaggressions, and hostility. This concept was central to this study as we sought to understand how presidents of color perceive their constituent’s views of their communication decisions in connection to their identities.

The second concept posits that race effects how leadership is enacted in different ways by leaders of color than their white counterparts. Arguing that the majority of research utilizes race as a variable to be included or manipulated to understand its relationship to an outcome, Ospina and Foldy (2009) claim that some research demonstrates how race is associated with actual leadership actions. For example, Hogg (2001) argued that leaders of color would be more likely to alter their leadership style to align with their White counterparts. Though focused on age, as well as presidents of color, Wrighten (2018) finds that leaders of color talk about adjusting the way they communicate to be more acceptable with their audience, which provided another illustration of being conscious of race when enacting leadership actions. In this study, presidents provided insight into how they perceived their identity effecting their decision to communicate, and how they crafted messages. While the level of reflection each individual president provided varied, all participants discussed this concept in their interviews.

**Figure 1***An Integrated Framework of Insights about Race-Ethnicity*

*Note:* Figure presented with author permission (See Ospina & Foldy, 2009).

The final concentric circle, or concept of the integrated framework, argues that leaders and followers alike grapple with the social reality of race in leadership actions and reactions. This aspect of the theory is most closely associated with critical race theory (CRT), as it highlights how society and historical systemic inequities influence leaders of color in disproportionate ways than White presidents (García et al., 2018; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). This concept was needed to better understand the presidents in this study as they discussed the PWI context and the community where their institutions resided. Ospina and Foldy (2009) argue that in action, this aspect of the theory is evident when leaders reflect on how they navigate the perceptions of their constituents, or how leaders perceive the larger context of their role in relationship to societal constructs.

## Data and Methods

Participants for this study were identified using a purposive homogeneous sample focused on community college presidents of color from PWIs (Onwuegbuzie & Collins, 2007). The decision to focus on community colleges was made for three key reasons. First, community college leadership is an understudied area generally (McNaughtan, 2018), despite their significant role in the higher education. For example, more than half of all undergraduate students in the United States are enrolled in community colleges (Ginder et al., 2014), which highlights the importance of these institutions. Second, community colleges have historically been more connected to their local economies than other institutional types. This additional connection to the community was deemed important in connection with the integrated theoretical framework for leadership as the research team believed it would increase the probability of presidents discussing their experiences with community and campus constituents. The final reason for focusing on predominantly White community colleges was to limit the scope of the work to one institutional type and highlight the experience of presidents of color in a specific environment.



While community colleges may have different sizes and demographics, the plights of many community colleges are similar (e.g., lack of financial support, student retention, etc.), thus the presidents in this study could discuss their challenges in a similar context to help reach saturation during data analysis.

To identify participants we utilized the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) to identify Carnegie classified two-year institutions which were then randomly sorted. We then reviewed websites for each institution until we found 20 self-identified (i.e., institution biographies or press releases containing presidential demographic information) presidents of color. The research team then invited those individuals to participate in the study and three presidents accepted the invitation. We then attempted a snowball sampling approach by inviting participants to provide the names of presidents of color that may be interested in participating which resulted in three additional individuals for a total of six participants.<sup>1</sup>

Table 2 provides some descriptive statistics for each president, which have been rounded in all cases to protect the anonymity of the participants. We do not disclose the sex of the individual presidents to further protect their identity, but the sample includes three men and three women. All six participants were Black with an average tenure of 5.6 years with the shortest tenure being one year and the longest tenure being 10 years. The majority of the presidents were from campuses with less than 10,000 students (4) and all but one president is from a PWI.<sup>2</sup>

**Table 2**

*Select Descriptive Statistics of Each Participant and Their Institution*

<b>Presidential Identifier</b>	<b>Student Enrollment</b>	<b>% of students that are White</b>	<b>Tenure of President</b>	<b>Race of the President</b>
President A	>10,000	>50%	>5 Years	Black
President B	<10,000	>50%	>5 Years	Black
President C	<10,000	>50%	<5 Years	Black
President D	<10,000	>50%	<5 Years	Black
President E	>10,000	<50%	<5 Years	Black
President F	<10,000	>50%	<5 Years	Black

### **Data Analysis**

In this study we utilized a case study approach, which can be useful when exploring a common experience or event that the participants have in common (Creswell, 2014). The case study approach is also appropriate for researchers who have multiple data points to use when conducting their analysis (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Creswell, 2014). For example, in addition to the interviews with six different presidents we also reviewed IPEDS data and the context of each

<sup>1</sup> Appendix A includes the interview protocol for this study.

<sup>2</sup> For the one president included in the study that was not at a PWI, their institution was over 40% White and the president also had previously experienced leading a PWI.



president's respective institution to inform our understanding of their responses. The case study approach is also appropriate when seeking to analyze a particular experience of multiple people and then drawing parallels for applications in general settings (Rossman & Ralis, 2003). In this study, each participant was interviewed for 45 to 90 minutes utilizing a semi-structured question protocol to capture detailed lived experiences about being university presidents (Yin, 2017).

Coding the participants' responses was done using Strauss and Corbin's (1998) three-step approach to coding qualitative data: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. A coding team of two researchers coded the responses individually in the open coding phase. Following this process, the team met and discussed salient themes until saturation was reached during the axial coding phase (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The lead researcher on this project then coded all data utilizing a selective coding approach. Following the coding, the research team met to discuss and identify the selected themes.

## **Findings**

There were a number of themes that emerged from the interviews which provided insight into: 1) how presidential racial identity guided what presidents chose to communicate about and 2) how presidents of African descent perceived their identities to influence how their messages were crafted. Here we present the results by theme, though it is important to note that some of the themes may overlap. Given that the integrated race and leadership framework posits that race permeates both actions of leaders of color, and perspectives of those actions by constituents, this overlap is not surprising.

### **A Consciousness of Who Is Listening**

The first theme identified from the interviews was that presidents were reflective about who was listening to their messages, and for whom they crafted the message. President A discussed how generally "The communication that I use changes occasionally, sometimes more formal if for example we have commencement coming up I am usually pretty formal," but this president continued to describe how the formality is less important when speaking to high school kids or teachers. President D offered further advice focused on how the audience influences when the president speaks, saying:

Depending on who you're talking to, you have to sometimes try to package that message a little bit differently just trying to really put yourself in their position and say "Okay when I was in that role, or if I was in that position, what would make sense to me? What matters to me?" Because I still think most often people, when they listen, they're saying "What about me?"

The idea of knowing to whom you are speaking is helpful in not only reflecting on what to say, but also in considering when to speak.

President D discussed in more detail, how knowing the campus community increases the level of caution when communicating with the campus. When asked about how the demographics of their campus and community influence when communicating, President D stated:

It influences it a lot. At the same time I would probably say I might look foolish to some respect and I mean that because these are dangerous times, really, that we're living in. And people are pushed to violence by the most minuscule, non-existent things and we've seen that. And this is a community where that could

easily happen. And most would probably say, and I've had the Black community come to me and say "You're moving too fast, you need to slow down. You're doing too much, you have to be careful or you won't be here long." And I get it and at the same time I say the very reason that I ever aspired to be in this kind of a role was to be able to make change and to make a difference. And so being silent just doesn't work for me.

This recognized concern illustrates how the perceptions of race influence when presidents speak, and provides some ideas of their concern of increased violence related to racial tension. However, as President D states, the risk is worth it in some situations.

One president discussed the contrast between being a president of color and being a White president stating:

I once had a White man say to me, a president, say to a group of us in a leadership development through the American Association of Community Colleges, and he pointed to the fact that he is in a better position to hire employees of color than someone of color. And that is so true. When you're in communities like mine and, I would suggest, even across the country, the discussion about diversity and having diversity in your ranks, every president of color is under more pressure around selecting candidates of color than the majority is. And how you communicate that, how you know when you can make that decision, and how many of those decisions can you make and not be putting your own self at risk? (President F)

In summary, these presidents perceived that their identity (especially racial identity) influenced how they connected with their audience and caused additional reflection about how their White counterparts may experience the presidency differently.

### **Racial Battle Fatigue**

The second theme associated with when presidents of color communicate was a sense of racial battle fatigue (Smith, 2004; Smith et al., 2011). When reflecting on how the experience of a president of color may differ from a White president, President F claimed: "I think sometimes it might be similar, but I think if you're a person of color there is a different expectation, maybe, that could be more taxing and more of a burden on you." The idea that a president of color may feel a more significant burden was echoed by President D who stated:

Being a Black person in a {PWI} has been especially challenging for me to navigate. One of the selfish reasons I am participating in this research study, and I've done maybe one or two before is because it's therapy for me. It's cathartic for me. I get to just speak and I don't have to mince words as much as I do on a daily basis. I can finally get it off my chest.... {This} is a place where people don't see color. So for me on the spectrum of consciousness and awareness, they're at ground zero but they think they know. They think they're very astute and knowledgeable and thoughtful and all of the smiles and handshakes and welcome to this community and we're so glad you're here, and as a Black person I see that as a very privileged position that you're taking.

President D's comments highlight a feeling of censorship imposed by being a Black president in predominantly White community and campus.

For some presidents, their fatigue was influenced by actions of colleagues. President B described how “A few of my colleagues started to attack me for being away or paying too much attention to Black folks.” This president continued to describe their need to censor themselves, saying “I just had to be more circumspect about racial issues.” This president provided insight into how some of the expectations placed on presidents of color that cause fatigue are internal, but for many presidents the demands placed upon them causing fatigue are much more visible. For example, President E claimed:

Every prominent and non-prominent Black organization in the city and county has found me, and it is overwhelming. In a social cultural context there is a theory around this called the Black Tax, and it is real. And I just don't have enough time in the day. And the interesting thing about the Black Tax, it doesn't just work among Black people, I also become the token for our boards and organizations that are trying to diversify their boards. And so there is not a week that doesn't go by that I don't get a request to serve on some kind of board organization.

The Black Tax reference highlights another way presidents of color describe the heavy burden placed upon them.

The presidents in this study faced significant internal and external challenges, leading to racial battle fatigue, as evidenced by their interpretation of the racially charged or racist experiences that limited the frequency of their interactions with non-Black people. In addition, these presidents saw their engagement with college communities influenced by these challenges.

### **Focus on Local Impact**

All of the presidents in this study were asked if there was a feeling of additional pressure to communicate about issues related to their identity (e.g., Black Lives Matter, Me Too movement, etc.). Each president discussed how their decision to communicate was mainly based on their perception of the local impact if a communication was issued. For example, President C discussed the many national incidents related to race and stated “What I speak about is, things that are relevant to the advancement of the institution, advocate of the students, or the faculty on behalf of education, or the board on behalf of education. And there is a fine line of taking political stances because those can backfire.” This president felt compelled to speak only when supporting constituents, but acknowledged the potential challenges of getting involved.

Other presidents were not as concerned about how their statements would be perceived with one president claiming that it was not their job to make others, specifically White people, comfortable:

I'm not here to make people comfortable, if I am walking into a room and I am not president of a college, my job is not to make the White person who I am coming into the room to see comfortable. Why should that be? (President A)

This statement highlighted how this president felt strongly that reflecting on the audience, speaking out on issues that needed to be discussed on their campus was worth the risk. President D echoed these thoughts by stating “I came to do what I consider ‘the work.’ And as soon as I think that it is impossible for me to do the work, then I will leave.”

President D also shared how rather than focusing on national issues she often uses her own experience in the community to discuss issues related to race:

What I have done is used my own experience to speak out publicly about some of the inconsistencies that have occurred for me in this community. And if it's happening to me, it's happening to the least of us. And I consider myself the least of us. I'm not trying to put myself ...up on a pedestal then I would say that all those others that you don't, I cannot imagine what their daily lived experiences are. Because my children in our "nice" residential neighborhood have been told to get out of the tree in their own front yard because they don't belong there. Getting on the bus of all White students with a White bus driver has been told with a cast on her arm trying to carry her book bags had closed the bus door in her face and drove off while I'm sitting there.

These very specific examples were not only shared by President D as all participants in this sample echoed that while there is engagement with national dialogues in a limited way, their main focus is on their own institution and community.

### **Connection and Support from the Community**

Perhaps connected to the history of community colleges as a unique institutional type, these community college presidents described how being connected to the community influenced how communications were crafted. President A claimed that he benefited from being from the area that his college is located stating:

As a Black man there are some groups ordinarily would be very skeptical of me coming to speak with them because of their ignorance or they just don't, they haven't run into too many Black people, and they don't know how to behave but I, again have the fortune of having come from this area, and I was very active in high school and so after being gone 35 years that there are people who I didn't know who knew me.

This president continued to share how that connection, and the good will that his father had built in the community allowed him a significant amount of credibility.

In a similar vein President B talked about how being from the community helped to build trust stating "As a leader, I have to move in a lot of different places. I have to be comfortable and approachable and accessible and welcoming." This president continues by describing the importance of trust:

Having people trust that I'm going to do what I say I'm going to do. That you trust that I have good values and I understand where people from {city where college is located} are coming from, even when we don't agree with each other.

While these presidents discussed having that trust due to a previous connection to the community, other presidents discussed their own efforts to build trust with constituents. For example, President E discussed two strategies:

I think my style of being hands on, and visible, and taking on tough dialogues that many people want to have but didn't have a platform to have, has built a degree of trust where people actually are at ease. So, me buying a house here very early and inviting people who normally didn't have access to the president, to my home.

This president took on challenging issues and bought a home to demonstrate the commitment to the community. Another president shared a strategy of connecting their personal history to that of their students saying:

I'm a child of a teenage parent, and they didn't go to college. And, didn't understand that path, my mom raised me as a single parent. Everything that comes with the composition of me matches with the voices of our students. So, that's why I see myself no differently than who they are. The challenges of working while you're going to college, and still gotta get to class, that was me.  
(President C)

Whether the connection to the community was based on the presidents past experience, or intentional strategies, these presidents discussed how the support from the community informed how messages were crafted.

### **Racial Socialization and Adaptation**

In addition to the role of the current community that the presidents were in, the majority of the participants discussed how lessons taught by parents and past experiences of talking to White people that influenced their communication decisions. President D described their socialization process in this way:

I have realized that as a Black person, I have had the gift, I would say it is a gift, to have learned how to navigate to some degree an intercultural space because I've always been a minority... So without even realizing it, I have studied how White people talk and what's important to them and what they like, body language, how they dress, how they wear their hair, I studied it. I have been taught and trained by my parents, my grandparents, all of my family members about this is what you need to know about White people. So I had that gift my whole life to have learned how to navigate in that space. I can either be invisible or not, it depends on what I choose to be on that given day.

In describing their socialization process, this president identified both their experiences and discussed how parents informed them on how to act. In a similar vein, President F also discussed the importance of recognizing that people will always be looking for reasons to scrutinize the president which will require adaptation, stating "People are going to find things and try to measure everything you do, but if you're a minority president, that's just one more thing; or a female, it's just one more thing that they'll try to scrutinize you."

Some presidents described how their minority status led to added expectations and in some ways how it often gave White people a pass to not engage in significant challenges related to race. For example, President A articulated this frustration when asked if he felt that as a president of color there were enhanced expectations to communicate on issues of race stating:

I definitely feel as though if I were a White president; number one, the question wouldn't be asked of me, which insults me, and occasionally I'm asked by a press person about some issue and then I'll ask why are you asking me? They don't want to say because you are a Black guy right? So they come up with some pathetic reason, I say is it because I'm a Black president? Or is it because I am a Black person?

This president went on to say “that White people expect you speak on issues of race and yet, nothing gets done if it is only the same people in the room after each racist event.” This president then spoke about attending a community meeting following an incident that was racially charged:

Where all the White people? This was a racial incident I think by a police officer who did something, abused some person, so I said, you don't need to be talking to me, you need to be talking to the White people in some of the ... and there are a number of outlying communities; ask them why they behave that way, asking me what am I going to do about it, I'm not doing anything about it. What I'm going to ask is where are the leaders of this this Corporation, this Corporation, this Corporation where is the city manager, the police chief who is White, I said where the hell is the police chief?

This president continued to share that over time as a president of color one sees the same usual suspects, which could discourage a president's desire to engage.

In a similar vein, President B shared their decision to rarely make statements for national events because of concerns that it would not make an impact. This president described one example with their perception:

I think I tweeted, and it was after one of the police shootings of an unarmed Black man, I tweeted Black Lives Matter. That's all I said. I got a lot of friends because people saw it and started following me. I didn't do it for that purpose. I just felt like I needed to say something. I thought my head was going to explode if I didn't. I did do that, but usually, unless it impacts on my campus or the people in it, I'm really, I want to say careful, but it's not that I'm careful.

Sadly, this sentiment of being careful was shared by many of the participants with one (President C) stating that their general policy is to “make no public statements.” President D lamented that there is a specific mold that Black presidents had to adhere to claiming that the perception of White people is:

The Black people that are in positions of power, influence and authority here are those that, yeah you're the good one. You talk like I want you to talk. You dress like I want you to dress, you've gotten this many degrees, you drive this kind of car, you live in this community, okay, you're a good Black person. And you talk a certain kind of way, you're going to always give me some Martin Luther King quotes and leave me feeling good on Martin Luther King Day and we're going to sing We Shall Overcome and you're good, it's that kind of Black community that is here.

This idea of a specific mold for a Black president illustrates a systemic oppression imposed on these leader that limits, and in some ways can punish these leaders for fully engaging in issues of social justice and equity.

## **Discussion**

In this study, we applied the integrated theory of race and leadership (Ospina & Foldy, 2009) to enhance our understanding of the lived experiences of leaders of color in higher education. Utilizing a case study approach, five themes associated with when and how presidents of color at community colleges communicate were identified, including: 1) a consciousness of

who is listening; 2) a sense of racial battle fatigue; 3) a focus on local impact; 4) connection and support from the community; and 5) the skill of racial and social adaptation.

Aligning with the integrated theory of race and leadership, our findings indicate that presidents perceive constituents to view them through a racial lens, and in most cases believe they are treated differently with different expectations for them as presidents of African descent. This finding is associated with the first concept of the framework and is also connected to the deficit framing of leaders of color that many scholars have discussed in past research (Bordas, 2007; Ospina & Foldy, 2009; Wolfe & Dilworth, 2015). Despite the deficit framing, our study provides evidence of the second concept of the integrated theory of race and leadership which argues that leaders of color then enact leadership within a race-conscious frame. We find that presidents of engage in specific communication strategies, such as, understanding their audience and censoring their comments to match that audience, focusing on how the issues discussed are tied directly to their community, and building connections within their community to develop trust. Similar to the work of McNaughtan and colleagues (2018, 2019), presidents in this study had core values that guided what and how communications were crafted, but in contrast to the work of previous studies on presidential communication we find that the core values most influential in the communication decision of presidents of color are internal, often social justice related.

When considering the third concept of the Ospina and Foldy (2009) theory, we find that for many presidents the desire to engage in deeper conversations of social justice and inequity, referred to as “the work” by some presidents. However, many described this grappling with the social reality of race in the context of power dynamics and equity as difficult to pursue in their institutional contexts. Even for the one president who was not serving in a PWI was met with resistance by individuals at the institution who were counting the number of Black people hired, and claiming that this president was promoting a personal agenda. Other presidents were explicitly told to “slow down,” and all experienced a sense of racial battle fatigue due to the expectations of their community, or racially charged experiences doing their presidential duties (Smith, 2004; Smith et al., 2011).

Building on the Ospina and Foldy (2009) framework, our study illustrates that presidents of color at community colleges delineate between the social reality of race locally and the national context, preferring to focus on the issues of race in their local communities. This finding stands in contrast to the work of McNaughtan and McNaughtan, (2019) which found that presidents of four-year flagship institutions were often more motivated to communicate when peer-institutions or national pressure occurred. Our findings indicate, that the third concept could be expanded to address the complexity of understanding the social reality of race and leadership from a local (institutional) perspective, and a national perspective. The presidents in this study lamented what Gasman et al. (2015) claim, that most people are not willing to engage with diverse others, however, the presidents of color in this study argued that their connection to the local community and ability to navigate White spaces allowed for a greater chance for these critical conversations.

### **Implications for Future Research**

Results from this study highlight four directions for future inquiry. First, scholars should seek to understand how the racial identity of presidents of color at other institutional types aligns, or differs from the presidents at community colleges in this study. The very nature of a community college and its historical tie to the community may lend itself to different coping mechanism utilized by presidents. For example, presidents centered their decision on the local



impact and the also discussed the role of their community. In other institutional types, they may be a larger focus on the national reputation of the institution or state governments.

Second, presidents in this study discussed the role of White presidents being easier to engage in social justice issues. An empirical analysis of the experience of White leaders who engage with social justice advocacy would be enlightening to understand what works for those leaders, and where challenges exist. Guided by this study, it would be enlightening to see if social justice focused White leaders see the same resistance as leaders of color, and to understand their coping strategies for those challenges.

Third, in this study presidents of color described feelings of racial battle fatigue (Smith, 2004; Smith, Hung, & Franklin, 2011), future research should analyze how these presidents find respite for their fatigue. In addition, some presidents were bolder in the face of battle while others chose to disengage from some racially charged incidents. Further analysis of what leads one president to engage more fervently and what leads another to disengage could be insightful.

Finally, this analysis does not consider the intersectionality of president's identities and future research should dissect that to see how different identities potentially inform presidential decision making. For example, this study had a balance of men and women but there is likely additional unique challenges faced by Black women than Black men. Similarly, one of the presidents in this study identified as a member of marginalized faith community which could also influence their experience as a president when a predominant faith is present in their community. As scholars continue this line of inquiry, critical analysis of the intersections of identity may provide additional perspectives and insight in this area of research.

### **Implications for Practice**

The purpose of this study was to enhance our understanding of the role of identity, particularly racial identity, in presidential communication decision making. The themes of this study highlight a number of potential implications for practice. First, presidents of color should continue to develop and utilize national support networks. Presidents in this study often referenced other presidents of color that they spoke to about issues on their campus. These networks were helpful generally for their leadership, but were especially salient to support presidents of color as they faced racism and macroaggressions on their campuses. One president even referred the opportunity to participate in the research project a "therapeutic experience," which highlights the need for these presidents to have strong supports, even if it is just to listen to each other.

In a similar vein, the second implication of this study is that institutions need to be intentionally developing local support networks for presidents of color. While all of the presidents shared experiences with racism there was a stark division in how presidents felt when confronting those issues with their governing boards and communities. In cases where presidents felt the board supported their challenge to racism, the president's discussed their enhanced ability to complete their work and promote organizational change. When presidents did not have that level of trust or support, the president expressed frustration and expressed concepts related to racial battle fatigue. When hiring a president of color, the development of a network and candid conversations about the inclusiveness of the climate would help presidents prepare for some of the challenges they would face in their potential new role.

A third implication of this study is the need for additional training for both presidents of color and institutional leaders in general. For presidents of color, this study highlights some of the most common issues that these presidents experience which could be infused into existing leadership training, or used to develop new training for leaders of color that focuses on

preparing these leaders for the presidency. In this new or enhanced training leaders could be given cases from existing presidents of color that are both topical, in terms of issues that presidents face regularly, but that also infuse aspects of racism. This complicated scenario would provide presidents of color additional preparation and help them to identify strategies for the additional burden they will bear as a president. In addition to training for presidents, other institutional leaders such as governing boards need enhanced training that focuses on the complex experiences that presidents of color have and how to be supportive and inclusive in those experiences. In many ways, the themes of racial battle fatigue and the socialization of presidents of color illustrate that these burdens are not new for these presidents, but many institutional leaders will be ill prepared to or uninformed about the additional challenges their new presidents may face and additional training may help to increase the support that presidents of color receive.

## Conclusion

Prior research contests that the challenges faced by leaders of color have an added degree of complexity when compared to their White counterparts (Smith, 2004). This study provides additional evidence and insight for that assertion. Further, our analysis informs the literature on presidential communication and highlights how the experiences of presidents of color at community college differ from presidents at four-year institutions. As new leaders of color enter the executive ranks of higher education, research on presidential communication that accounts for the integration of race and leadership will play a pivotal role in the preparation and retention of these leaders to advance causes of social justice and equity.

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## **Appendix A: Interview Protocol**

1. What expectations do you perceive your campus community have for your communications?
2. How does being a president of color influence how you communicate to your constituents? (What/ How/ Why)
3. How do your racialized, gendered, sexual orientation, and religious identities influence how you decide to communicate?
4. How does the context of your campus (demographics, political climate of the state, etc.) influence your communication decision making?
5. Who is involved in crafting (process) of your presidential messages and why?
6. Do you feel pressure to respond to public events when they are associated with your identities?
7. What advice did you receive and apply as a president, which worked for you?
8. What advice would you have for new presidents on how to communicate effectively?
9. Are there any additional questions you feel like we should have asked that we did not?
10. Do you know of anyone else who would be interested in speaking to us?



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## SPECIAL ISSUE

### Striving for Social Justice and Equity in Higher Education

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