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Community College Presidents and Campus Safety: Perspectives on Critical Issues

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Community college presidents must understand the phenomenon of campus safety. For this mixed-methods study, community college presidents in one state were surveyed, and three presidents from the same community college system participated in in-depth interviews. Descriptive statistics measured the levels community college presidents' knowledge and perceptions on campus safety. The in-depth interviews provided a deeper understanding of the connections between community college presidents and campus safety. Overall, the results show that campus safety is important to community college presidents, who believe that, overall, their institutions are safe. We found that community college presidents believe they should be proactive and reinforce values that promote and prioritize campus safety, follow regulations, and provide sufficient resources to ensure campus safety measures. However, inadequate funding also plays a role in what can be allocated, and community college presidents voiced that they were concerned about promoting safety in the face of declining budgets and resources.

The concept of campus safety is not new to community college educators; in fact, the way leaders look at campus safety today is very different than just a few years ago. Campus safety concerns of community college leaders today include crime, natural disasters, community unrest and political divisions, and health and safety concerns related to the COVID-19 pandemic. There are many who are affected by unsafe environments on college campuses, and these include current and prospective students, employees, campus law enforcement, and the communities that are adjacent to the campus. When a campus is perceived as unsafe, it can negatively affect enrollment (Braaten et al., 2020) and legal actions from a victim or their family can take a toll on institutions (Bienstock, 2019). Campus safety may “be seen as an issue that destabilizes the core principles of higher education itself” (Jennings et al., 2007, p. 1).

Campus crime has been reported since Colonial America, but it was not until the 1980s and 1990s that society demanded changes in the reporting requirements of campus crime statistics (Sloan & Fisher, 2011). The 1986 rape and murder of Jeanne Clery, a student at Leigh University, and the efforts of her parents brought campus crime and safety to the forefront of public concern (Gross &

Fine, 1990). More recently, as media coverage brought stories of campus crime to Americans, community colleges and universities have been negatively affected (O'Donnell et al., 2018), and college leaders have taken note.

Problems with campus crime are often overshadowed by more immediate threats to the safety of students and college staff: the COVID-19 pandemic, community unrest and racial tensions, and climate-related natural disasters. These events impact community colleges, and it is important for leaders to recognize and understand the community college's threat landscape in order to protect the college and the community it serves. Crimes, health threats, violent student protests, cyber threats, and natural disasters can disrupt daily class schedules and impact critical college infrastructure. Although this study focuses on campus crime, it is important to acknowledge that other threats to campus safety do not stop when leaders are addressing campus crime-related events. Leaders must constantly monitor threats and identify areas in which the college can improve safety procedures and policies in order to maintain continuous delivery of classes and other learning activities. The findings of this study provide an advancement of knowledge on the processes needed for campus operations – even when resources are limited.

Statement of the Problem

It is important that community college administrators are familiar with issues related to prevention of violent and nonviolent crimes that could affect their students and employees. In addition, the cost of compliance with federal campus safety laws and reporting requirements has a disproportionate impact on already stretched community college budgets.

Although college presidents usually do not have direct oversight of campus safety matters, they are held responsible by governing boards and not campus constituencies: students, faculty, administrators, and the communities served by the college. Since presidents are accountable for the

legal, financial, and professional effects of campus safety policies, it is important to focus empirical research on their perceptions of campus safety issues. Much of the research has concentrated on officials in student affairs who are more directly responsible for campus safety (Janosik & Gregory, 2003, 2009; Jee & Good, 2017; Latham-Staton et al., 2020; Patton & Gregory, 2014), but there is a clear need for more research on senior college leaders' awareness of campus safety issues, especially at community colleges.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this mixed methods study was to examine community college presidents' perceptions and level of understanding of campus safety. It is important for governing boards and other college constituencies to know if presidents are aware of issues that can adversely affect the safety of their institutions. The study addressed research questions pertaining to how community college presidents describe: (a) their role related to campus safety, (b) the level of safety on their campus, and (c) their level of knowledge regarding legal issues pertaining to campus safety.

Significance of the Study

Decision making is a skill all higher education leaders need, but it is especially important for community college leaders. They lead institutions which are traditionally under-funded, and which serve a large proportion of students historically marginalized by other institutions of higher education, including women, people of color, first generation college students, students who have jobs, and students with physical and learning disabilities. Since the Great Recession of 2008, most community colleges have faced declining state appropriations, and more recently these same institutions faced enrollment declines related to the COVID-19 pandemic (Laderman & Tandberg, 2021). These fiscal and enrollment challenges have created unprecedented problems for community

college leaders, faculty, and staff. Presidents must find ways to balance meeting academic standards and safety requirements with dwindling budgets. In these difficult times, funds are sometimes transferred from one area of the budget to cover another priority. This could lead to situations in which campus safety suffers. For example, the availability of the latest security tools and a lack of safety personnel can have dire consequences. The findings of this study will help presidents to ensure that campus safety requirements are met to help ensure that those who are on or near their campuses are safe. Although campus safety usually does not appear in writing in a community college's mission statement, it certainly is implied that those who go there to learn and work should feel safe.

Conceptual Framework

Heifetz' (1994) approach to ethical leadership provides the conceptual framework for this study.

Heifetz' approach allows leaders, including community college presidents, to use the authority granted to them to help those directly dealing with the issues solve challenging problems.

Community college presidents can provide support through funds to bolster campus safety initiatives like emergency alert systems, adequate lighting, and hiring more security personnel or support staff. As community colleges grapple with decreasing state funding, difficult decisions must be made about where to properly allocate funds, and this can create ethical dilemmas on how to disperse those funds to the areas that need them the most.

The American Association of Community Colleges ([AACCC], 2018) published a list of competencies for community college leaders. Two of the competencies that are directly related to this study are collaboration and resource management. Collaboration, or the ability to create change through teamwork and cooperation (AACCC, 2018), is a natural fit to Heifetz' (1994) ethical leadership approach. Resource management is an area where community college leaders must

allocate funds in a manner consistent with the college mission, master plan, and local, state, and national policies (AACC). Community college presidents view resource management as one of their most important and challenging issues (Garza Mitchell, 2012; Tuliao et al., 2021), especially in light of dwindling state funding. Community college presidents must, at times, make moral and ethical leadership decisions to ensure that very limited funds are allocated where they are most needed. Campus safety must remain a priority and is an important goal of proper resource management. Beyond the community college leaders' basic responsibility to keep students and employees safe, there are statutory and legal obligations related to the mandates of federal and state laws, the cost of regulatory noncompliance, and potential lawsuits due to negligence.

Review of the Literature

There have been many high-profile incidents on college campuses, and much of the news reporting on these events have cast wider nets on tragedies like Jeanne Clery's rape and murder, mass shootings on college campuses like Franklin Tech and Northern Illinois University. Community colleges have not been immune to similar tragedies, like at Umpqua Community College in 2015. The mass media has played a large role in disseminating information on these events, which has led to an unfair assessment that campuses are unsafe; however, when comparing reported campus crime rates, we can see that these assessments are exaggerated or misunderstood.

While community college and university campuses are not crime-free, they are safer than portrayed by the media (Birnbaum, 2013). Between 2006 and 2016, violent and nonviolent campus crimes decreased from 60,024 to 37,389, with burglary being the most reported crime, which decreased from 35,082 to 13,575 (United States Department of Education [ED], 2018). In 2018, there were over 37,500 crimes reported on college campuses nationwide, and 3,883 (10.3%) of those occurred at community colleges. Of those, 1,184 (30.49%) were aggravated assault, 858 (22.09%)

were motor vehicle theft, and 383 (16.25%) were robberies (Office of Postsecondary Education, 2021). Compared to 2008, crime numbers are down quite significantly; however, they are still high. There were 52,730 overall reported crimes, and 8,039 occurred at community colleges. The top three reported crimes remain the same and are aggravated assault 4,230 (52.61%), motor vehicle theft 1,714 (21.32%), and robbery 814 (10.12%) (Office of Postsecondary Education, 2021).

The Impact of the Clery Act

The purpose of the *Clery Act* is to provide the public, including potential students and their families, information about specific crime statistics and information about reported campus crimes to help them make an informed decision to attend. Another purpose is to ensure that those on campus are aware and notified of potential security threats so they can change safety behaviors (Janosik & Gregory, 2003). After several decades, scholars have continued to measure, and question, the impact of *Clery* on campus crime and safety. Janosik (2001) found that a strong majority of respondents were not aware of Clery and only 4% used the security report when making their college decision. Student discipline officers have had to make adjustments in their processes because *Clery* requires reporting of campus crimes (Harshman et al., 2001). *Clery* does not require reporting of crimes off campus. This lack of reporting crimes that occur near campus or crimes that affect students of a certain institution not being reported can create a false sense of security (Nobles et al., 2012; LoMonte, 2014; Thomas-Montford, 2020).

Clery requires that timely warnings, which are targeted messages often referred to as campus alerts, are issued for “serious or on-going situations” on campuses (Sulzer et al., 2022). Timely warnings have been found to be effective as some students changed their safety behaviors (Jee & Good, 2017), but younger students, known for feeling invincible and more immune to crime (Peralta & Cruz, 2005; Rader et al., 2012), tend to be less fearful of becoming a victim of a campus crime and

their perceptions of the crimes that could affect them are not based in fact (Patton & Gregory, 2014). Other studies reported that faculty and staff also feel safe on campuses, but they are not immune to the fear of becoming a victim as well (Baker & Boland, 2011; Kyle et al., 2017); however, female faculty and staff did report higher levels of knowledge of campus safety services (Fletcher & Bryden, 2009) or changed working hours to avoid being on campus after hours (Trawalter et al., 2021).

Clery requires that institutions keep “students and employees informed about threats to their safety and health in a manner that allows them to protect themselves” (U.S. Department of Education, 2016, p. 6). This is done through daily logs, email notifications, and annual reports. However, notifications, especially email notifications, may not be interpreted in the way they are reported (Janosik & Gregory, 2009). Crisis communication can also be affected by relevance, create different levels of anxiety and fear, and can result in “reduced campus participation” (Hasinoff & Krueger, 2020, p. 602). For example, these communications, often poorly worded, can result in misunderstandings, particularly around racial and ethnic stereotyping (Van Vliet, 2020).

Methodology

This mixed methods study examined community college presidents’ knowledge and understanding of campus safety as well as their perceptions of campus safety at their institutions and in higher education, in general. The research also assessed the participants’ direct experience with campus safety issues. This study was approved by the Old Dominion University Human Subjects Review Committee (project #1010282-1).

Community college presidents from one southeastern state were chosen through purposeful sampling, which allowed the researchers to decide who to select, to determine a sampling strategy, and pick the sample size (Creswell, 2013). The Franklin (pseudonym) Community College System

(FCCS) is a system of 23 institutions. As the research team had access to this population, convenience sampling was also employed to survey the FCCS presidents and select three presidents for in-depth interviews. Focusing on FCCS leaders created a homogeneous sample in terms of education and professional achievement as each president adheres to the governing guidelines of the Franklin State Board for Community Colleges and reports to the system chancellor. However, individual characteristics such as race, age, and gender, as well as institutional characteristics like campus size and location were not homogenous. The sample consisted of three community college presidents representing a small, medium, and large-enrollment college based on the classification of the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education (n.d.). Institutions deemed *Very Small and Small*-enrollment have full-time equivalent (FTE) enrollments of 1,999 students or less; *Mid-Sized institutions* have FTEs between 2,000 and 9,999; *Large and Very Large*-enrollment institutions have 10,000 or more FTEs. Geographically, smaller FCCS colleges are found in rural areas; mid-sized colleges serve both rural and urban populations, and large colleges are generally in urban or large suburban areas. This allowed for the three presidents to come from a cross-section of campuses throughout the Franklin system.

The study began with a survey instrument distributed to the 23 community college presidents in FCCS. The results of the survey informed the interview questions for the three in-depth interviews.

Data Collection Measures

Two data collection methods were employed in this mixed methods study. The first was a survey of the 23 FCCS presidents. The survey asked participants to rate their knowledge and perceptions on campus safety issues with various items utilizing a Likert-type scale. A panel of experts, with expertise in campus safety issues, reviewed the instrument to establish content validity. Several

revisions to the instrument were made as a result of this review. The reliability of the revised instrument was established through a test-retest procedure. Finally, a pilot test of the instrument was conducted by FCCS employees.

The lead researcher asked the president of the college where he worked to contact the other 22 FCCS presidents to introduce the survey and for the presidents to expect a call for participation. An email followed with an introductory email from the research team, which provided the research purpose and information on human subjects' protections, and anonymity and confidentiality. This email was followed the day after with the electronic survey, which was opened for five weeks, with weekly reminders. Twenty-two of the 23 FCCS presidents participated in the survey; one had retired, and the incoming president was too new to the role to participate.

The survey measured FCCS presidents' knowledge and perceptions of campus safety and was analyzed using descriptive statistics. The survey results also informed the in-depth interview protocol. Three FCCS presidents were chosen from the 22 respondents based on campus size and geographical location. The lead researcher recorded the interviews and took field notes. Member checking, "the ongoing consultation with participants to test the 'goodness of fit' of developing findings" (Hays & Singh, 2012, p. 206), was used to ensure the accuracy of the interview transcripts.

Data Analysis

The initial survey provided descriptive statistics of the FCCS presidents' perceptions and knowledge of campus safety issues both on their campuses and in general. Common themes were identified from the survey results and were used to develop the interview protocol, which included open-ended questions designed to produce the levels of knowledge, perception, as well as the individual experiences the participants had surrounding campus safety. The pattern matching process, which involved searching for meanings and patterns in the data, initiated the analysis, cross-case synthesis

was used to determine similarities and differences between the three cases (Creswell, 2013). Finally, the researchers developed naturalistic generalizations from analyzing the data, generalizations learned from the cases to be applied to a population of cases (Creswell, 2013).

Trustworthiness

To maximize the trustworthiness of the findings, the research team maximized the participants' voices. The first method was member checking, which is "the ongoing consultation with participants to test the 'goodness of fit' of developing findings" (Hays & Singh, 2012, p. 206). The researchers provided transcripts to the participants and allowed them to review and amend their transcribed words. Trustworthiness was strengthened through triangulation; the researchers sent a survey instrument to the entire population of FCCS presidents and performed in-depth interviews with presidents from three different size institutions. Finally, after independently coding the interviews, two peers familiar with the project reviewed the interviews and the codes for dis/agreement to establish inter-rater reliability. The reliability ratio was calculated at 0.78, which is higher than the 0.70 acceptable minimum (Hays & Singh, 2012). Finally, an audit trail was used that included field notes and transcripts from the in-depth interviews, the codebook, the audio recordings, and a reflective journal (Hays & Singh, 2012).

Limitations

This study has several limitations. The first is that it only examined one state community college system, which does not allow for generalizability and transferability of the findings to other community colleges. Further, the differences in community college governance from state to state may have an impact on a community college president's knowledge and perceptions of campus safety. Additionally, this study took place in one state, with the pseudonym Franklin, where one of

the worst historical instances of campus violence occurred. The impact of that mass shooting may have influenced the experiences of community college presidents in the state.

Results

The study produced a considerable amount of data from the survey of all community college presidents within the Franklin system and in-depth interviews with three of the presidents. The results are presented in the three focus areas of the study: the role of the president related to campus safety; the presidents' perceptions of the level of safety on their campuses; and the presidents' level of knowledge on safety-related issues.

Presidents' Role and Experience Related to Campus Safety

The survey instrument asked the respondents whether they believed their campus had an adequate emergency response plan. All respondents indicated they believed this to be the case. Another question inquired whether the presidents believed their decisions impact campus safety. Over 90% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed they did. A third question asked whether the respondents had experience with dealing with campus safety issues. Over three quarters of the respondents (77.2%) reported they did have such experience, while three respondents neither agreed nor disagreed, and two respondents reported they did not. A final survey question asked whether the presidents knew what to do in an emergency. All the presidents either agreed or strongly agreed they had this knowledge.

Additionally, the presidents also addressed seven survey questions regarding their role and responsibility regarding campus safety for their institution. All of the presidents responded that they should – and do – keep up with campus safety issues. Most respondents (90.9%) reported that considerations of campus safety issues guided their decision making and two respondents neither

agreed nor disagreed. Also, all the presidents indicated they had a responsibility to address campus safety issues with their constituents. Specifically, over 90% of the respondents expressed an obligation to address their governing board members about safety issues. More than three quarters (81.82%) of the survey respondents noted that they advocated for funding for their campus safety initiatives and the same percentage advocated for funding for safety personnel. Nineteen of the 22 respondents (86%) noted that they read their Annual Security Reports before they were released to the ED and constituents.

In the interview responses related to this research question, the major theme was the presidents indicated they did not have resources to reinforce campus safety and security issues on their campuses. In response to this, the three interview subjects indicated a desire to acquire the latest tools and equipment to assure campus safety. The three presidents believed that prioritizing campus safety and security was an important function of their jobs. Managing and controlling safety issues and impacting the overall environment and climate of the school community were also perceived to be important aspects of their jobs.

Community College Presidents' Perceptions of Safety on Their Campuses

Thirteen statements in the survey instrument addressed this research question. Seven statements addressed the presidents' level of agreement about how they and various groups on campus viewed campus safety. Six statements asked the presidents' level of agreement with the adequacy of safety personnel, initiatives, and features at each participant's institution. All but one of the presidents indicated their campus was safe with one president believing that their campus was not safe. Over 90% of the same respondents indicated they believed their students thought their campus was safe while the remainder were not sure. Over 86% reported that both faculty and staff believed the campus to be safe. All but one of the presidents reported their perceptions that their security

personnel and campus visitors perceived the campus to be safe. A smaller – but still high – percentage (over 80%) of the presidents reported their perception that the areas around the campus were safe.

From the interviews, the data indicated a need to be proactive in creating a multifaceted program on their campus to address and prepare for threats and other issues. Among their expressions of concern, they addressed issues of the need to have an accredited and sworn police force to increase visibility of police presence, providing drills and mock training as required by the Clery Campus Safety Act, providing formal training for college personnel beyond campus police, and keeping up with technological advances.

Presidents' Level of Knowledge About Laws Pertaining to Campus Safety

There were seven survey questions that addressed the presidents' knowledge of laws regarding campus safety. The first asked whether their institution published an annual campus security report. Only one respondent was unsure; the remaining 21 presidents agreed that their institution produced such a report. The next question measured the presidents' beliefs of their awareness of federal campus safety laws. Twenty respondents (95.2%) were familiar with such laws and two participants were not. The next question measured the presidents' belief their institution was following federal safety laws. All 22 presidents strongly agreed that their institution was complying. The next question measured the presidents' perception of knowledge of state laws that pertain to campus safety.

Twenty of the presidents indicated they were aware of these laws, while two participants disagreed.

A more specific question asked the presidents whether they perceived the Clery Campus Safety Act as effective in promoting safe colleges. Less than half (45.5%) of the respondents agreed that the law was effective; eight were unsure, and four participants believed it was not. The final question assessed perceived agreement with the effectiveness of the state of Franklin campus safety

laws. Over half of the respondents agreed the laws were effective, six participants were unsure, and four participants felt the state laws were not effective campus safety laws.

The main theme that emerged from the presidential interviews involved the need for community college presidents to understand and comply with safety protocols, policies, and regulations. The participants specifically mentioned Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) regulations, SANS cybersecurity training, and the campus safety regulations of the *Clery Act*.

Discussion

The current study revealed that while community college presidents are generally familiar with the issues and laws related to campus safety, they still struggle with assuring campus safety is a priority. Acquiring appropriate funding and resources to ensure campuses have what they need to be safe, and for students to feel secure continues to be a challenge.. The current study supports the findings of Garza Mitchell (2012) who marked this as a critical issue for community college presidents and that the need for money for campus safety issues was continually of concern to presidents.

The respondents in this study indicated they believe campus stakeholders think their respective campuses and most community colleges are safe. The presidents noted their belief that employees (including security personnel) and visitors felt the campuses were safer than did the students, and that employees were more aware of what to do in emergency situations than students. Most respondents perceived that they had adequate resources to fulfill campus safety initiatives; this was not found in the in-depth interviews where the presidents interviewed expressed the concern about inadequate resources. Further, the interview participants believed they needed to be proactive in creating campus safety initiatives and increasing the visibility of safety personnel by having or partnering with an accredited police force. This finding confirms previous research, including

Connolly's (2012) report on the promotion of crisis preparation and threat assessment at community colleges

Both the survey responses and the interviews revealed the positive roles of community college presidents on safety issues. Community college presidents continue to play an active role in protecting their campuses as well as communicating safety decisions and measures to the rest of the community. From the interviews, community college presidents provided examples on how they reinforce safety values and practices primarily through communication. Community college presidents need to spearhead the institution's safety practices and enhance institutional preparedness and readiness when faced with campus safety issues (Gnage et al., 2009; Paape, 2021) whether related to campus crime, natural disasters, the COVID-19 pandemic, or cyber security issues.

Both the survey and interview responses provided similar responses, regarding the awareness of the community college presidents on the importance and efficiency of the laws on campus safety. Participants provided *Clery Act* annual reporting and FEMA and SANS training as examples. Participants were knowledgeable about the fact that colleges and universities must follow laws pertaining to campus safety. Additionally, they displayed skepticism on the efficacy of campus safety laws, which illustrates a deeper understanding of campus safety laws than mere working knowledge of their existence. Awareness, working knowledge, and skepticism of the effectiveness of campus safety laws indicates that participants understand the importance of campus safety at their institutions, which is positive for constituent confidence.

Implications for Community College Presidents

The results of this study may be used by community college presidents to modify or improve their current campus safety initiatives and as they advocate for funding for initiatives aimed at providing safe learning environments. By promoting a safe campus environment all stakeholders benefit,

potentially leading to more efficient performance from all members of the college community. This study demonstrates the awareness and readiness of college presidents to provide the best and safest possible environment for their students, faculty, staff, and visitors. However, there are issues and challenges faced by community college presidents as they perform their roles.

Based on the study results, we offer several recommendations which may be employed in current practice and future studies. Community college presidents should regularly review their own perceptions of campus safety at their institutions, and they should compare their perceptions to those of key constituency groups. Additionally, the presidents should contrast their perceptions with actual campus crime data. Community college presidents should increase their awareness of the current state of campus safety by continually updating their knowledge pertaining to campus safety issues and pursue information as needed. Further, by studying the examples and practices of other colleges, community college presidents can discover new perspectives that could assist them in their leadership practices in terms of campus safety initiatives. Community college leaders must address how students prepared for emergency situations when the majority of the students are part-time as well as commuter students. Leaders must find ways to focus on emergency preparedness in venues other than the classroom. One seemingly obvious option is to ask faculty to instruct students on campus safety at the start of each semester. A challenge with this option is finding adequate training time for full-time faculty who are on nine- or ten-month contracts as well as training for adjunct faculty members who spend limited time on campus. A better option may be to provide mandatory online emergency preparedness training for all students, faculty (full- and part-time), staff, and administrators like the National Center for Campus Public Safety's training webinars for higher education professionals.

Future researchers can advance the knowledge of campus safety by conducting interviews with other community college officials, faculty, students, governing board members, and

community-based stakeholders. The additional data may help improve overall recommendations for how campus safety may be improved based on the perceptions and experiences of all campus stakeholders. Future research should examine how institutional characteristics such as the size of enrollment (small, medium, or large) and location (rural, suburban, or urban) affect the presidents' perceptions of the campus safety.

Conclusion

The results of this study may be employed as solid pieces of evidence that expand the body of research on campus safety. This study is unique given that the main data source used was gathered from the community college presidents themselves. Community college presidents' firsthand perceptions and experiences brought new insights and lessons on how community college presidents view campus safety. Leaders must also take charge and stay proactive and current on campus safety conditions and the needs of their respective institutions. In addition, although the community college presidents were positive about the current status of the safety of their respective colleges, the respondents voiced concerns about promoting and maintaining safe institutions in the face of inadequate funds and resources. Community college presidents face lack of funding, which greatly affects their ability to develop and enact safety initiatives. Ultimately, the community college presidents reported the importance of following the laws, policies, and other regulations to warrant the welfare and safety of all the stakeholders of the campus. Through this research study, the participants consistently highlighted the importance and value of campus safety.

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