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# Managing Stress in a Time of Increased Pressure: Perspectives from University Presidents

Russell S. Thacker and Sydney Freeman, Jr.

## Abstract

The modern university presidency continues to become more complex, resulting in numerous personal and professional stresses placed on a president. This study explores the sources, impacts, and successful prevention and management of stress in the position. Data for the study comes from qualitative phenomenological interviews with five sitting presidents of public and private universities in the United States. Using a theoretical lens derived from executive stress theory, the authors examine the degree to which a need for personal control and stability play a role in producing stress and motivating certain stress responses. Meaningful relationships, positive mindsets, and repeatable practices of self-care and reflection are found to have a positive impact on presidents' ability to manage stress. Greater awareness of stress management through education and training will benefit presidents and prospective presidents in navigating the position.

*Keywords:* crisis management, higher education, leadership, presidency, stress

Today's university presidency is among the toughest jobs in America. The average president's tenure in office has declined significantly in the last ten years, from 8.5 years in 2006 to 6.5 years in 2016 (American Council on Education [ACE], 2017). Resignations and firings in the executive suite seem to appear in the media at increasing rates. From 2011-2016, 56 of the 81 public 'Tier 1' universities experienced turnover in the presidency (Greenblatt, 2016). Such change reflects the soaring expectations and stress of the position. A campus chief must simultaneously be a leader, teacher, cheerleader, fundraiser, negotiator, lobbyist, crisis first responder, and social media expert, all while retaining credibility in one's academic community. The scope of duties might well be compared to the job of a mayor, city manager, or a chief executive officer (Chatlani, 2017). Some have compared the position to that of a U.S. president, who is said to occupy a position of an "impossible presidency" (Suri, 2017, p.1) in which success is judged according to increasingly unattainable standards.

The stress of the job is illustrative of its ongoing importance in today's higher education landscape. How presidents act, spend their time, speak, and do not speak is closely scrutinized and has enormous implications for a college or university (Eckel & Kezar, 2011). Therefore, it

is appropriate to ask how presidents manage and deal with stress to retain their physical, mental, and emotional fitness for the position. We aim to learn how presidents handle the stress endemic to their role and uncover whether differences in stress management strategies and techniques exist among their peer group. Finally, we explore implications of this research for university presidents wishing to develop their own interventions to manage and prevent stress.

## Literature Review

To understand the stress of the modern presidency, we first review the literature on stress in higher education as an occupation, stressors on those who work and lead in this sector, the impact of this stress, and known interventions.

### Stress in Higher Education

Converging forces at the enterprise, institutional, departmental, and individual levels continue to transform higher education within the United States and in developed nations (American Association of University Professors [AAUP], 2016). The increase in organizational complexity, external constituencies, and fiscal pressures in higher education is well-documented (Cook, 2012; Stone, 2012). Growing outside influence from governments and industry has created new oversight structures and introduced additional bureaucratic requirements. New public

management reforms based on performance and accountability have become increasingly market-oriented and introduced a level of competition for both public and private funds (Shin & Jung, 2014).

Organizational structures have largely not kept pace with the new academic environment (Eckel & Kezar, 2011). Many universities carry out twenty-first century missions with sprawling early twentieth-century industrial structures (Reynolds, Lusch, Cross, & Donovan, 2009), reaffirming and administrative staff list job long-time University of Chicago president Robert Hutchin's definition of a university as "a collection of departments tied together by a common steam plant" (Birnbaum, 2004, p. 185). At the same time, changes at the faculty and student level are occurring rapidly (Kinman, 2008). The rise of the contingent workforce means only 30% of faculty are now considered to be on tenure track compared to 78% in 1969 (AAUP, 2016). Meanwhile, due to the rise of new delivery methods, such as online learning and for-profit options, students increasingly seek alternative paths of education (Cook, 2012).

Scholars generally agree that higher education is becoming a more stressful work environment. Now almost twenty years removed, Winefield's (2000) review of literature showed stress levels had increased among the academic workforce in the fifteen years prior. Subsequent studies have corroborated this trend

(Gillespie, Walsh, Winefield, Dua, & Stough, 2001; Hogan, Carlson, & Dua, 2002; Johnson, Willis, & Evans, 2018; Shin & Jung, 2014). Within the academic workforce, several scholars have found job type to be an important differentiator of stressors (Jacobs, Tytherleigh, Webb, & Cooper, 2011a; Johnson et al., 2018). For example, faculty report promotion concerns and governance activities as primary sources of stress and job dissatisfaction (Kawakami, 2006), while non-academic conditions, work relationships, and compensation concerns as more paramount (Johnson et al., 2018). Other scholars have found that academic supervisory status (Dua, 1994) and occupying a gender-incongruent position (Jacobs, Tytherleigh, Webb, & Cooper, 2011b) have higher associations with on-the-job stress levels. Gillespie et al. (2001) found that across the academic workforce, the main sources of stress include insufficient funding, work overload, poor management, job insecurity, and insufficient recognition.

### **Stress in the Presidency**

The role of a university president arguably combines the stress elements of faculty, administrative, and supervisory roles with the demands and expectations common to leaders in all fields. The presence of stress in leaders outside of higher education has been well-documented. In a cross-sector survey of over 200 multi-sector leaders, more than

two-thirds reported their stress level higher than five years earlier (Campbell, Baltes, Martin, & Meddings, 2007). Further, a segment of new presidents comes from non-academic paths and likely encounters a steep learning curve on arrival. In 2016, 15 percent of new presidents came from an immediate prior position outside higher education (ACE, 2017).

A primary source of stress is the external demands on the position. As higher education continues to move in the direction of a market-based system, competition for both public and private dollars consumes more time and attention (Shin & Jung, 2014). Presidents report lack of financial resources as the number one frustration of their tenure (ACE, 2017) and fundraising as the task for which they were least prepared, yet which occupies the most time (Cook, 2012). The president's chief external stakeholders are the public officials, legislatures, or boards of education (or external foundations or churches if a private organization), yet presidents also view these constituents as least understanding of their challenges (ACE, 2017).

Presidents are under pressure to quickly deliver visible results, often beyond the reach of what is possible. Barmak Nassirian of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities said, "More and more we see universities being subject to very short-term assessments, almost in the

way that publicly traded companies are judged by quarterly income calls, without any agreement defining what constitutes success," (as cited in Greenblatt, 2016, para. 3). The president must be on call "24/7/365" to handle crisis response (Wilkins, 2012, para. 6). In the social media age, even small issues can flare into public problems, and larger, more deeply rooted issues such as sexual harassment, financial mismanagement, or ethical misconduct can consume a presidency. For university presidents, the responsibility to respond to these situations and fear of any potential missteps add to the stress of their position.

### Impact of Stress

The physical and emotional impact of stress on individuals in the workplace varies across higher education. A stress evaluation survey called, *A Shortened Stress Evaluation Tool (ASSET)* has been used over the last two decades in several U.K. universities to demonstrate linkages between workplace stressors, performance, and employee health outcomes (Johnson et al., 2018). Using ASSET, Jacobs, Tytherleigh, Webb, and Cooper (2011a) found, not surprisingly, that the presence of stressors had a negative linear relationship with performance indicators in the workplace. But these results were mitigated by respondents' physical health, mental health, and level of organizational commitment. Hogan, Carson, and Dua (2002) found there are

behavioral, cognitive, and psychological reactions to stress, yet these results were influenced by age, and gender to some extent. Scientific researchers have also shown that stress has physical, mental, and emotional characteristics that can manifest themselves even much later in life (Foster, Rinaman, & Cryan, 2017).

Additionally, a growing body of evidence suggests non-work stress and work stress are interrelated. Research has substantiated the impact of work stress spilling over onto family relationships and creating stress in the home (Repetti & Wang, 2017). In addition, non-work stress, which includes family or personal health concerns, has been found to have significant impacts on well-being and productivity on the job (Dua, 1994; Hogan et al., 2002). Presidents are not immune to the impacts of non-work stress. In a large representative sample of university personnel, Hogan et al. (2002) found that non-work stress can be a strong predictor of job stress, stating, “In fact, in absolute correlational terms, non-work stress was often a better predictor than job stress with respect to many of the reactions to stress reported in this study” (p. 309). They also reported that females experience non-work stress at a higher level than males, as do younger employees.

### **Interventions**

As stress is inevitable, leaders must find coping strategies which facilitate the ongoing accomplishment

of their work. Folkman and Lazarus (1985) defined coping as “cognitions (thoughts) and behaviours that a person uses to reduce stress and to moderate its emotional impact” (p. 5). Two dimensions of coping are common—problem-solving and emotion-regulating. Desa, Yusooif, Ibrahim, Kadir, and Rahman (2014) described problem-solving as efforts to “define the problem, generate alternative solutions, weigh the costs and benefits of various actions, take actions to change what is changeable, and if necessary, learn new skills” (p. 35). Emotion-regulating strategies, on the other hand, include methods such as “distancing, avoiding, selective attention and blaming, minimizing, wishful thinking, venting emotions, seeking social support, exercising and meditating” (Desa et al., 2014, p. 35-36).

While limited research exists for interventions used by university presidents, abundant information is available for other groups in higher education. Various practices such as setting role boundaries (Gillespie et al., 2001), a daily walking routine (Fischer, 2016), and the use of Jungian preference awareness education (PAE) such as Insights testing (Stefansdottir & Sutherland, 2005) have been found to yield moderate results in lowering stress levels among higher education employees. A stress management study of 46 academic leaders at a Malaysian university (Gurnam Kaur Sidhu & Nor Sa’adah Aziz, 2015) revealed that most leaders found a problem-focused

approach involving cognitive restructuring more effective than an emotion-focused approach.

For some leaders, stepping away from sources of stress is the best remedy. Campbell, Baltes, Martin, and Meddings (2007) found that 90 percent of the most popular coping mechanisms listed by leaders in a cross-industry survey did not actually involve the source of stress (p. 14). Equally telling are stress interventions which leaders report *not* receiving. Forty-four percent of university presidents reported wishing they had more time for thinking and introspection (ACE, 2017). Nearly 80 percent of leaders across sectors said they would benefit from access to a stress management coach (Campbell et al., 2007). And 28 percent reported not having adequate resources at their organizations to manage stress (Campbell et al., 2007).

Although some research has occurred around stress in higher education and among leaders in various sectors, significant gaps remain in our understanding of how stress affects university presidents. The specific challenges and responsibilities of university presidents and the increased importance of these leaders in today's educational landscape necessitate a more detailed look. Our research now moves to this important topic.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Do leaders experience stress to

a greater or lesser degree than subordinates, and why? The subject of stress in executives has generated substantial debate in the last sixty years. The origin of much of the controversy is a classic study conducted by Brady (1958) on the difference in stress response between "executive" and rank-and-file monkeys. He subjected monkeys to a simulated stress environment where monkeys in a decision-making position were shown to have greater risks of developing ulcers than other monkeys. Brady theorized that executive monkeys overexerted themselves under the stress of their position. The research method used by Brady has since been discredited (Sherman et al., 2012), nevertheless the resulting "executive stress syndrome" has spawned a body of research focused on the comparative stress experienced by those in leadership positions. Research has been found both to support (Gesquiere et al. 2011) and refute Brady's findings (Sapolsky, 2005; Sherman et al., 2012).

Some scholars contend the inconsistency in research for and against the executive stress theory is due to issues of control and insecurity associated with certain leadership situations (Sapolsky, 2011; Carney et al., 2018). For example, the research of Gesquiere et al. (2011) found that alpha males in baboon troops experienced higher stress levels only during periods of instability and leadership challenge in the troop. When alpha baboons felt their position was tenuous or threatened, they showed higher stress levels which

led to more aggression and infighting to preserve power and status. Carney et al. (2018) in their research on “stress buffers” examined this same phenomenon and concluded, “it seems that the ‘executive stress syndrome’ occurs only in a very narrow kind of... social structure: rigid societies in which hierarchies can be threatened or are unstable and power can be lost” (pp. 3-4). Thus, stress levels in a certain position would appear to be related to one’s sense of personal control and stability over their work environment. For example, Sherman et al. (2012) showed that leaders exhibit lower stress levels if they have a heightened level of control in their leadership role. Control in this context is defined as a “psychological resource” (Sherman et al., 2012, p. 17903) which gives an individual a sense of influence over a job function.

These findings present an intriguing framework for our study of university presidents. It is clear the position can be stressful, yet what characteristics make it stressful? How do issues of control add to or lessen feelings of stress? We aim to understand how presidents experience and respond to stress, and how their degree of control and stability over their leadership environments relates to their stress.

### **Methods**

This study utilizes a phenomenological qualitative case

study approach. This specific approach was selected to capture a true sense of the lived experience of university presidents with stress. Many methods of inquiry can shed light on one’s experience; however, phenomenology is ideally suited to increase our understanding of stress and its role in the presidency. Kirkegaard and Brinkmann (2015) remind us that “stress as a phenomenon is located beneath the skin” (p. 82). Heidegger’s original conception of phenomenology included the quest to understand the internal, lived experience of being, being in the world, and interacting with other entities in the world (Horrigan-Kelly, Millar, & Dowling, 2016).

Data for this study derived from a broader series of interviews with thirteen sitting university presidents. The interviews were conducted in a guided format over telephone and in-person and then transcribed from a recording of the conversation for accuracy. The primary focus of the interviews was to explore the educational pathways and preparation of university presidents with the aim of understanding how doctoral programs for higher education administrators could be improved to meet the needs of future campus leaders. During the interviews, five of the presidents focused their comments on the stress of the presidency which led to additional lines of inquiry by the researcher. Although a majority of the thirteen original participants did not discuss the phenomenon of stress in detail, the data



was so rich, powerful, and compelling among those who did we felt it was important to explore in greater depth.

### Sample Selection

The five presidents in the sample led a wide range of institutions in the United States with enrollments ranging from 2,000 to 50,000 students. The interview group was drawn from a population of registered members of the American Council of Education who met certain criteria including 1) leading universities rather than colleges or other postsecondary schools, and 2) possessing a graduate degree with a specialization in higher education administration. One female and four males comprised the sample; and three led Predominantly White Institutions (PWI) while two led Historically Black Colleges or Universities (HBCU). Two of the participants were African-American, and three were White. Pseudonyms of the participants were used to preserve anonymity. This study constituted an additional phase in a series of studies on the higher education presidency (Freeman, 2011 & 2012; Freeman & Kochan, 2012a, 2012b, 2013, & 2014).

### Coding and Analysis Process

Data collection resulted in a variety of sources, including field notes written during participant interviews, ideas developed during the research process, and audiotaping and

videotaping of the interviews. These data sources were then triangulated to confirm the study's results (Carter, Bryant-Lukosius, DiCenso, Blythe, & Neville, 2014). A start list of 80 "a priori" codes formed the basis of our analysis. These codes derived from a literature review of higher education programs and presidential leadership. Not all codes appeared in the start list, and emerging codes were added as unanticipated topics arose in the analysis of the interviews, such as the code of *stress management*. Similar emergent codes were combined with one another to limit redundant codes.

Due to the nature of case study research, the research team employed the "coding incident to incident" approach advocated by Charmaz (2014) throughout the analysis process (p. 53). This enabled the opportunity to compare similar incidents experienced by various participants and identify emerging themes from the codes. These themes were then assigned into one of the following theme categories: (a) causes of stress; (b) impact/toll of stress; (c) methods of stress management and coping; and (d) awareness and prevention of stress. A research table was then constructed to include corresponding quotes or examples for each theme in the data.

### Concerns for Validity, Reliability, and Trustworthiness of Results

It is important in qualitative research to ensure that results are valid,

reliable, and trustworthy. Given the limited sample size, challenges exist in generalizing the results to populations outside university presidents.

Additionally, although HBCUs and PWIs were both represented, the limited range of identities of institutions and individuals prevents generalization to all university presidents. These challenges are in line with historic issues in interviewing elites, particularly attracting large numbers of participants in high profile positions (Mikecz, 2012). However, steps were taken to foster trustworthiness and reliability of results such as using thick narrative descriptions and utilizing another researcher to review the themes for accuracy. In addition, follow-up email contacts were conducted for purposes of member checking and data validation. Member checking provided an opportunity for presidents to review the researcher's summations to ensure that they correctly reflect the presidents' feelings and responses (Birt, Scott, & Cavers, 2016). The follow-up contacts also allowed the researcher to ask additional questions based on the responses from the initial interview. These processes occurred while

maintaining a reliable audit trail of data sources, researcher notes, and documentation of analysis within the research team (Shenton, 2004).

The study addressed both the epistemological perspectives of traditional scientific research criteria

and the social construction and constructivist criteria. The approach to traditional scientific research criteria is characterized by rigorous and systematic data collection procedures, using multiple coders and calculating intercoder consistency to demonstrate the validity and reliability of theme analysis (Carter et al., 2014). The researchers addressed each of these concerns by using a thoroughly outlined process that included unitizing and coding. The researchers addressed the social construction and constructivist criteria by acknowledging bias and using at least one of four triangulation methods during analysis.

### Summary of Participants Backgrounds

The five presidents interviewed for this study represented a wide range of institutions, including public and private, HBCU and PWI, and doctoral and master's-granting institutions. Below we provide additional information regarding the backgrounds and professional paths of the participants in this study.

**Evelyn Aurora.** Evelyn Aurora led an HBCU in the Northeast United States, a public, master's-granting institution with enrollment of close to 2,000 students. Prior to service as president she served as associate vice president for academic affairs at a highly selective research university in the South; vice chancellor for public service and extended education and associate

provost at another institution; associate vice president for academic programs and dean of the University College at a university in the North; dean of continuing education and nontraditional degree programs at a Mid-Western University; and dean of continuing education at a college in the Midwest. Dr. Aurora had received numerous awards and recognitions for her service in higher education. Prior to pursuing her doctorate in higher education, she served on the English faculty at a community college.

**Gavin Benjamin.** Gavin Benjamin was the president of a public PWI in the Southeast region of United States. He led an institution with an enrollment of close to 10,000 students. He worked as a biologist prior to earning his doctorate in higher education administration. Prior to becoming president, Benjamin served in numerous administrative and teaching positions. Among these were coordinator of medical technology program, director of academic advisement, assistant vice president for academic affairs, associate vice president for academic and student affairs, acting vice president for academic affairs and acting vice president for institutional advancement. As president, he was noted for developing and implementing the university's first campus-wide strategic plan.

**Nolan Cooper.** Nolan Cooper was president of a public HBCU in the Southeast United States.

He led a master's-granting public institution with an enrollment of more than 7,000 students. He had served in the presidency at both Predominantly White and Historically Black Institutions. Prior to service as president he served in various senior administrative roles such as vice president of diversity and vice president of student affairs. In addition, he was on the faculty as a professor of higher education in a doctoral program. Earlier, he completed a doctorate in higher education administration.

**Ian Flynn.** Ian Flynn was the president of one of the largest public universities in the Midwest region of the United States. He led an institution with an enrollment of more than 50,000 students. Flynn had a unique entrance into the field of higher education as he decided to pursue both his doctorate in education and law degree simultaneously. After completing both programs, he accepted a clerkship for a Supreme Court Justice. After completing his term there, he was invited to become an assistant dean at a law school and assume a faculty position. In that position he was assigned to admissions and administrative matters. Shortly thereafter he was asked to serve as a dean of a law school and then president of a large public university all before his late 30s. Flynn has since served as the president of a variety of higher education institutions.

**Peter Johns.** Peter Johns was the president of a private/religious PWI in the Southeast region of United States. He led an institution with an enrollment

of more than 4,000 students. Prior to seeking a doctoral degree, Johns earned both an undergraduate and master's degree in political science. Throughout his career he served in administrative roles in higher education including student affairs and development. The desire to gain a theoretical underpinning for his work led him to pursue a doctorate in higher education. By the time he started the program he was serving as vice president for development. After completing a three-year night and weekend doctoral program, the board of trustees asked Johns to take the presidency. Following much deliberation, Johns decided to accept the presidency and later accepted a second appointment as president of his current institution.

### **Findings**

We explored the concept of executive stress in the presidency by investigating the four aspects of stress identified in our data analysis: causes of stress, impact or personal toll of stress, methods of stress management and coping, and awareness and prevention of stress. These themes helped us understand how issues of personal control affect stress in the presidency.

### **Causes of Stress**

Interviewees identified several sources of stress related to the job

itself and how it intersects with other areas of their lives. Most prominent was the pace and intensity of the work. Flynn described, "I'm a workaholic. I work twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week." Several mentioned the continuous visibility of the position both on and off campus as a source of stress. Aurora described the position as a constant stream of stressors, each differing in impact depending on the institution:

I don't think you can imagine what the stress level is like until you have it. I think it is different at different institutions. It can be anything from the football team, to the wind came and blew the roof off and then you got a snow storm, or your favorite teacher dies. You also have a family life that has issues. I mean, it becomes an enormous stress.

Beyond the intensity of the position, presidents also described stress when encountering situations where expectations of the role were not anticipated. Tasks such as fundraising (ACE, 2017) and fiscal management were mentioned as areas where demands consistently exceed training or readiness. In addition, presidents reported feeling particularly unprepared when crises, tragedies, or circumstances with no clear playbook occurred. For example, Johns recounted a time when the community was shaken by a plane crash killing a student and a family member of a

university staff member, and he was thrust into the role of healer for the campus. He stated, “The only surprise that I’ve had... in my presidency... was when I realized in the aftermath of [the tragedy] that I had to be a minister to the campus, and I was very poorly equipped to do that.”

These findings illustrate how unpredictable events or tasks affected presidents’ feelings of individual control and led to stress. Managing crises was stress-inducing because it brought uncertainty. Tasks like fundraising resulted in feelings of vulnerability because of inexperience. Nevertheless, as these presidents gained control of a crisis or learned from previous experience, their stress decreased.

### **Impact/Toll of Stress**

While stress has an impact on professional aspects of life, many of the presidents focused their comments on the personal impact of stress. Cooper said, “There’s a personal dimension of leadership and the price we pay to lead or the sacrifices we make to lead.” One such dimension cited was the frequent misalignment of the highly visible professional life and regular private life of presidents. This results in periods of time when personal and family relationships are caught up in difficult campus situations. For example, Johns described the aftermath of the plane

crash tragedy and its impact on his family:

This is a very small liberal arts college, close knit, and [the tragedy] had a professional impact on me. I couldn’t even begin to predict what the personal impact was. The personal impact turned out to be the most devastating because I felt like I had to try to help all these people and so I ended up pouring myself out, everything I had, to try and help these people and I didn’t hold anything back from me or from my family. And, you know, my wife hung with me and all of that, but I mean that’s the sort of thing that can cause a divorce. It’s the sort of thing that can have a lot of other unanticipated consequences.

The impact of stress can stretch beyond the tenure of a presidency and have broader unforeseen consequences. Flynn remarked on his concern for the long-term impacts of the job on health, relationships, and balance in life, “I think those are the things I have missed and probably will regret for the rest of my life.” He continued:

What I worry about is what am I going to do when I give up this chair because my life has been so structured... And when you live

that structured life for 30 years, and all of a sudden you drop out of sight, you are no longer the president of a university and you're off the structure. How do you decelerate? I think that is one of the real challenges.

Ironically, presidents accustomed to the all-consuming nature of their work may find the loss of the position as their greatest stress inducement. The loss of position or status often means a loss of sense of personal control and purpose.

### **Methods of Stress Management and Coping**

Responding to stress and its impacts is a central question of this study. Interviewees mentioned several methods of coping ranging from practical everyday habits to holistic mindsets. Johns and Aurora both commented on the role of learning and reflection. Johns reported a practice of documenting his response to crises or major events in their aftermath. He published some of his experiences, including a textbook chapter on what he learned from an active shooter incident on campus. Aurora kept a journal on a regular basis as well as a garden. Benjamin commented on the role of regular exercise:

You have to stay fit. I didn't realize that until 2003 and I had some heart problems, so I exercise on a daily basis now. I walk at least three miles a day [and] work out at the gym three days a week. I've reduced my weight down. Those are things that help reduce your personal stress to deal with things.

Benjamin's comments align with calls by researchers and health professionals for greater focus on regular exercise for managing stress in leaders (Campbell et al., 2007; Bailey, 2014). Exercise constitutes an important part of daily renewal from the physical and emotional toll of stress in the workplace. It lessens the stress response in the body and releases endorphins which improve mood and mental outlook. In one study of the workplace, a mandatory workplace-based physical exercise routine over the course of one year was found to reduce absences for sickness by 11 percent and increase the productivity of employees during their time at work (Schwarz, Hasson, & Lindfors, 2014).

Moving from the specific to the holistic, all five presidents noted the importance of staying centered as individuals and maintaining quality personal relationships to address stress. Flynn focused on finding balance:

I think if I were giving advice to a young person like you, I'd say make sure from the very

beginning you have balance in your life. Work hard, play hard. Cherish your friends. If you get married, make certain you work hard at that. Love your kids. There's nothing wrong with having a spiritual side of your life.

Benjamin also addressed the spiritual dimension, stating, "I think a lot of [stress management] is personal. For me, it's my faith and my relationship with Jesus Christ." He also noted how spouses or close relationships are essential in keeping presidents grounded:

You just can't take yourself too seriously... My wife puts it very [clearly], you may be president across the street, but you're not a president here. If you want to have a successful marriage, you can't act presidential all the time... You need to be subservient from time to time.

Mindset plays a large role in stress management. Aurora stated, "What might be a stress for one person is not a stress for the others. It is all how you perceive it." Flynn suggested his mindset is to remember that his role is to inflict stress, not experience it. He stated jokingly: "The stress, yeah, the stress is there, but I've learned to deal with the stress. My job is to give other people ulcers and not

get them myself." Though in jest, his observation serves as a reminder that executives enjoy more autonomy, directing power, and privileges than their subordinates which counteract feelings of greater stress from their leadership position. These are among the "psychological resources" that leaders enjoy (Sherman et al., 2012, p. 17903).

### **Awareness and Prevention of Stress**

The data reveal the importance of raising awareness and preparing future leaders to manage stress. Many of the responses focused on learning from others' experiences, practicing self-care, and introducing healthy routines. Johns and Cooper both wished their leadership preparation and doctoral programs had included a greater focus on stress and crisis management in the curriculum.

Johns stated:

I don't think that we talked for a single minute in my doctoral program about crisis management, and you know you're going to have it. I created an email file on my computer finally that just says 'crises', and it's the stuff that doesn't fit anywhere else that pops up that is a media event and you know you just got to deal with it... You have [tragedies], you have automobile accidents, and you have bizarre things, crises.

Similarly, Cooper pointed out, "I think

the thing that I didn't get and that most programs don't attempt to teach people is this whole sense of wholeness and self-preservation, taking care of yourself."

Various methods of teaching these concepts were discussed. Johns recommended crisis management training be done via case study method. He related, "If a person is sitting at a desk like mine... there's great comfort in being able to think I've either been there before or I studied that before... it's going to be kind of rough, but this will be okay." Cooper also suggested creating professional development seminars or workshops where speakers could address the personal dimensions of leadership. All these initiatives serve to raise individual awareness and preparedness, leading to a greater sense of personal control.

### Discussion

These findings present an image largely in line with Sherman et al.'s (2012) and Carney et al.'s (2018) research on the relationship between stress and a sense of control in a position. The topics most often cited by the interviewees as inducing stress—handling crises, responding to tragedies, and even managing family relationships—represent situations where a president has the least control and most potential for professional or personal failure. By comparison, the stress interventions suggested by the

presidents have the intended effect of returning a sense of personal control and predictability to their lives. For example, reflecting on previous crises and studying case studies of other leaders' experiences brings a sense of preparedness and security. Even a regular exercise routine instills structure and constancy. This is echoed in a candid assessment of presidential failure by former university president Frank Rhodes (1998):

Only a disciplined routine, a managed calendar, appropriate delegation, a willingness to say "no," effective personal support staff, and the unswerving personal conviction of the ultimate value of the university's work can prevent personal exhaustion. Overburdened university presidents do not suffer burnout; they create it, inflicting it upon themselves by their lack of responsible work habits. (p. 5)

One of the luxuries of being in a leadership position is the ability to influence one's own schedule, determine priorities, and delegate responsibilities. These benefits stem from the power inherent in the position and are examples of the "psychological resources" available to leaders.

However, one of the key outcomes of this research is that seeking control in all aspects of life has its limits. The comments from Benjamin on being



“subservient from time to time,” and not “[taking] yourself too seriously” reveal a decidedly human side of stress management. By willingly ceding control over a few aspects of life, a president may gain peace of mind and a better ability to cope with situations outside of his or her control. The dexterity to change roles from a position of power and control to subservience and power-sharing without feeling threatened may differentiate leaders who suffer from executive stress and burnout from those who are able to emerge from the stress of a presidency no worse for the wear.

The findings also present evidence which adds to the research of Dua (1994) and Hogan et al. (2002) on the impact of non-work stress in the workplace. Because of their additional roles as “minister” and “healer” to the campus community, the job stress of presidents can also bleed into their personal lives. The support of close family and friend relationships can be a positive force in processing this stress, but work stress can also negatively impact those relationships, as seen in Johns’ example. It is telling that all five presidents focused on the impact of stress on elements of their personal life such as family and spouse relationships.

Another interesting discovery of the study is that most stress management methods cited by the presidents are not one-time deployable tools but continuous in nature. They

include exercising three times per week, nurturing relationships, writing and reflecting, and fostering a positive mindset. These suggest a recognition that stress is ever-present, and one can never “solve” stress. Furthermore, it is difficult to distinguish between a stress preventing and a stress coping mechanism. For example, regular exercise both lowers current feelings of stress and can contribute to a mindset that prevents future outbreak of stress. Stress management resides on the continuum from prevention to coping.

In summary, it is impossible to tell from a study of this size whether university presidents have stress to a greater or lesser degree than their subordinates or their peers in other job sectors. Nevertheless, the data suggest anything but a rosy existence at the top. Navigating the high-visibility and undefined responsibilities of a university presidency can take a toll on intersecting areas of life, and these personal factors can create additional stress. However, it must also not be lost that leaders enjoy significant benefits or privileges over their subordinates. Leaders can create “buffers” by instilling structure into their schedules and adopting stress-reducing mindsets. Not surprisingly, leaders thrive most when mechanisms are in place to exercise appropriate levels of control over their work environment.

### **Implications for Policy and Practice**

Several audiences may benefit directly from this research. First, for

sitting presidents, the methods and mindsets discussed here may prompt more deliberate efforts to manage and prevent stress. Specific recommendations include practices of self-care, personal reflection, and cultivation of close relationships. An active program of self-care through exercise and other healthy lifestyle practices can sharpen the mind and temper stress. Similarly, devoting time to thinking and reflecting can help leaders situate challenges into the proper perspective and build a reserve of knowledge for future need. These practices increase a personal sense of control and stability. In addition, evident from this study is the need to tend to personal, non-work associated relationships which can carry presidents through stressful times. These relationships ought to be real and genuine, as Benjamin stated, free from any pretense or aura associated with a presidential position.

Presidents or other leaders may wish to package these practices into a stress management or healthy lifestyle plan. The degree of formality for such a plan is a matter of personal preference, but at a minimum it should include physical exercise, intellectual recharging through writing, reading or reflection, and social support through positive relationships. Such plans ought to be developed collaboratively with immediate staff and closest personal relationships to create a network of support and accountability. Finally, we

recommend presidents seriously consider how they will exit their time as president and the potential impacts this transition can have on their well-being.

For prospective presidents and those intending to spend their careers in higher education administration, this research has implications for generating greater awareness of the stress involved in the presidency and other senior leadership roles. Designers of higher education leadership graduate programs may wish to incorporate topics on stress management into their curriculum. Situational judgment tests and case studies are highly recommended because they crystallize learning in a way few other methods can achieve. Schools may also want to open the conversation topic for their students through seminars or professional development workshops with invited speakers. To do this, Johns suggested:

I'm not sure that any program can really prepare you for [the stress], but in your ideal program design for instance a doctoral program in higher education could have one evening where three or four presidents come in and with a moderator who would press their buttons enough to get them to talk about the impact of the stress and how that affects them personally and how it affects their families.

Finally, for the public and other constituencies of the presidency, a dose of sympathy is warranted, not just for

the demands of the position—which of course, is compensated handsomely—but also for its sky-high expectations. By viewing presidents as human and therefore needing separation in their personal and private lives, the public can help presidents carve out the space they need to “be subservient” in some areas of life and ultimately have less stress in their positions.

### Future Research

This study has opened an exploration into the relationship between stress and the university presidency. However, greater focus on this topic is needed with larger samples and ranges of positions—for example, presidents serving in other postsecondary settings such as colleges or vocational schools, or other senior campus leaders. By comparing the impact of these senior executives, we may be able to see greater commonalities on the impact of stress on leaders. A greater sample size will also help us understand the demographic characteristics of stress not visible in this study; for example, what is the experience of female presidents serving in a gender-incongruent position (Jacobs et al., 2011b)? Do younger presidents, or those from non-academic backgrounds experience more stress?

Additional questions include the relationship between work stress and non-work stress. Future research

may explore how stress flows from the professional life of public leaders into their private spaces, particularly where leaders have *ministering* or counseling responsibilities. How does professional stress manifest itself in personal lives? What characteristics of personal life may mitigate this trend?

Finally, methods for coping with stress require greater investigation. What physical, intellectual, or social routines reduce or fortify against stress levels? How can these interventions be incorporated into the professional life of senior campus leaders in sustainable ways? How can higher education leadership programs include a focus on stress management in their curricula?

### Conclusion

The role of a university president is no small undertaking in today’s higher education environment. It requires a unique set of skills and generates considerable stress. This study has addressed how university presidents perceive, prevent, and manage the stress associated with their position. It has also examined the degree to which control and stability in the presidency, or lack thereof, play a role in producing stress and motivating certain responses. We found that presidents’ abilities to manage their stress hinges on the sense of control and stability they can introduce to the position. Yet, stress management also depends on the willingness to let go of total control at times. Meaningful relationships, positive mindsets, and

repeatable practices of self-care and reflection all have a positive impact on presidents' ability to manage stress. These interventions and an overall awareness of stress management are important additions to any higher education leader's toolbox.

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