

## Student Impressions of Community College Presidents

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### ABSTRACT

*This qualitative study explores student impressions of community college presidents. Through conducting interviews with six involved leaders in parallel roles at two community colleges, the study investigated what shapes student impressions of college presidents. Nearly half of all undergraduate students in the United States attend a community college. These students all hold their own unique perspective, but each impression is shaped by different factors. The study explored what shaped and influenced student understanding of the presidency, what influenced student impressions of the president, how the president impacted individual experience at the institution, and how students evaluated the presidency. It was found that participants who had a perceived connection on campus had a well formulated impression as well as could speak to their understanding of the president's role.*

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University and college presidents have busy and complicated jobs. Gardner (2015), a reporter for the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, wrote that modern college presidents are “expected not just to run institutions but also be their public face, representing them to students as well as parents, government officials, and donors” (<http://chronicle.com/article/New-Proving-Ground-for-the/228907/>). They must exemplify the institution’s brand, while acting as a “promotional superhero who grabs lunch with students and dinner with potential donors, tweeting all the while” (Gardner, 2015, <http://chronicle.com/article/New-Proving-Ground-for-the/228907/>). Bornstein (2004), former president of Rollins College, argued that presidents must act as the “embodiment of the institution” and because of this, they are no longer purely individuals (<http://chronicle.com/article/The-AuthenticEffective/35426>). The president is responsible for engaging in a variety of different ways to build relationships and foster support; however, the president still sees these activities at work (Bornstein, 2004). The president is focused on meeting the needs of the institution and furthering the mission, and this may include balancing relationships with the communities the institution serves. Those around or interacting with the president may only understand the positional responsibilities from a limited perspective.

There are various types of higher education institutions a president may serve at today, from public to private, nonprofit to for profit, large to small, two-year to four-year and beyond. No matter the type of institution a president leads, there are challenges to meeting the institutional mission, adapting to external forces, and pursuing institutional initiatives. A president of a

community college must understand the unique challenges and experiences of the institution in order to effectively lead the campus. Presidents of community colleges often come from other institutional presidencies or rise up from administrative positions at the same institution (Cohen & Brawer, 1982). Considering this, presidents of community colleges must balance understanding the campus landscape and interacting with the student body. In a recent *Chronicle of Higher Education* article, two current university presidents argued that student opinions are key to presidential success. The authors concluded that a “university will not be judged by its president, the beauty of its campus, or its football team – it will be judged by how seriously it has taken the education of its students and how well they perform in the world” (Gee & Hart, 2015, <http://chronicle.com/article/Advice-From-2-Streetwise/229457/>). Gee and Hart (2015), wrote presidents should “never underestimate the importance of building a relationship with your student body” (<http://chronicle.com/article/Advice-From-2-Streetwise/229457/>). Presidents must consider student impressions of them and their performance. These impressions can help presidents connect with students, develop intentional policies, and create long-term relationships between students and the institution.

The purpose of this study was to explore student impressions of top institutional leaders and how that may change over time at community colleges. An understanding of this relationship provides an opportunity to explore the dynamic between students and institutional leaders. The study used the following questions to guide the research: 1) How do students describe the role of the college president? What influences this perception? And 2) How has the student’s impression of the president changed over time and why?

## **Review of Literature**

College presidents are integral to the campus environment. As the leader of the institution, they provide guidance and insight, attend events, and speak on the behalf of the institutional interests (Gardner, 2015). Thus, an understanding of the following is important: role of the college president and what may influence the student perspectives of that role, how students interact with these presidents, and how students view and understand the leader.

### **The Role of the College President**

According to Gardner (2015) presidents spend their days being pulled in “different directions — fundraising, athletics, a fraternity scandal” and that has become “a daily reality for contemporary college presidents” (<http://chronicle.com/article/New-Proving-Ground-for-the/228907/>). A study of college presidents from the American Council on Education (ACE) reported that presidents spend most of their time fundraising, budgeting, managing relationships with the community, and strategic planning (Cook, 2012). As the advocate for the institution, the president balances a complicated, often exhausting role (June, 2007). The job may include many smaller pieces, such as working with alumni to generate donations, or meeting with the media to discuss a campus initiative.

**Master of Relationships.** Cook (2012) presented key findings of ACE’s study of American college and university presidents and identified that presidents must balance the interests of the different groups they serve. Cook found that presidents have many roles and

serve many individuals, but they reported working with students is rewarding. Through these relationships with different populations, presidents can enact change on campus, advocate for the institution, and make connections with various stakeholder groups. Students, like other stakeholder groups, may not see all of the different responsibilities of the president on campus, but the different expectations and appearances of the leader can influence student awareness and perceptions of the leader.

**Public Figure.** As a campus public figure, presidents must often make difficult decisions, frame change, and present organizational information to the greater community (Eddy, 2003). Eddy (2003) explored how presidents frame change on campus and included interviews with professionals from two institutions where each president framed change differently. The way information is framed may result in different interpretations of the changes on campus, as well as varying levels of confidence and awareness of the leader. It is important for presidents to advance their agendas and goals while balancing the political climate of the institution (Michael et al., 2001). Without this balance, presidents may shift the perceptions of their image and reputation on campus.

**Commitment to Students.** Gee and Hart (2015) wrote about the need for presidents to connect with their students. Without this connection, presidents may not excel in their role. An interview with a current and President Emeritus of a regional Midwestern state institution identified the need for a student-centered approach as a president (Glassman, 2016 & Hencken, 2016). The current institutional president highlighted that he serves a “myriad of constituents internal and external” yet is intentional in finding ways to “see the learning environment” through teaching so he is not out of touch (Glassman, 2016). The President Emeritus, who was previously a student affairs professional, also supported the need to remain in touch with students, and reported doing this through attending campus events, working towards organizational buy-in with new ideas, and putting students first (Hencken, 2016). The current president discussed the challenges of working with many groups, and stressed how standing meetings are important for communication and building relationships (Glassman, 2016). While presidents do serve an important role, and serve many individuals on campus, they also understand the importance of focusing on students. It may be an important part of the role of president; yet, as interviewees indicated; it is only one component of the role.

## **Students**

Students are a key campus constituency to the president. From creating policies to ensuring athletic traditions are continued to approving spending on a facility, presidents often make decisions that directly impact students (Schuemann, 2014). However, presidents and students may not interact daily or even understand each other and their experiences on campus (Schuemann, 2014). Scheumann (2014) identified a gap in the research looking at the dynamic between students and presidents. While there is information for presidents and faculty, community, staff, government, and other constituencies, it leaves much to be understood between presidents and students. The challenge with the literature is that many topics of student conversation and discussion of student impressions may not be documented in an academic forum.

**Students at Community Colleges.** According to the National Center for Education and Statistics (2016) there are over twenty million students enrolled in higher education. Of these students, 7.3 million attend community colleges in credit programs, and an additional 5 million individuals are enrolled in non-credit programs (2016 Fact Sheet, American Association of Community Colleges). The community college population is one of the most diverse in a variety of ways as well as the investment level varying from student to student. (American Association of Community Colleges, 2016). With this population being so diverse there may be even less interaction with the president and even less understanding of their role.

While community colleges across the country serve so many students, their graduation rates are not as high compared to four-year institutions. Gurantz (2015) studied student behavior and how it relates to outcomes at community colleges and found that student behaviors in completing tasks like registering may be influenced by the increased number of community college students, as well as challenges that come with providing students access to popular courses in areas like math and science. Community colleges are a unique part of higher education and with this comes a unique set of challenges for students. Presidents at community colleges work with students who have different experiences, backgrounds, interests, work expectations, and needs. This influences the dynamic between students and the leader when meeting the needs of an ever-changing student body.

**Student Involvement and Engagement.** Without students, the campus would cease to function. The primary reason students are at the institution is to gain an education; however, that is only a small percentage of how they spend their time in college. Falvey (1952) conducted a study that evaluated student participation in college administration at a four-year liberal arts college. While this was an early study, it presented themes and findings that still hold true today. One key finding of the study was that human connections can be a challenge when engaging students, but “individuals regard other individuals” (Falvey, 1952, p. 172). This is important to note, as often students or presidents are seen as something other than individuals and associate them with the institution as a whole, neglecting their individuality. Michael, et al. (2001) argued that students are less likely to speak up on subjects that matter to them if they feel like people will not care or listen. Students are more engaged in administration when they feel their opinion matters; and if this happens, that may change how they view a leader or administrator on campus.

A phenomenological study by Schuemann (2014) evaluated how students experience and understand the university presidency. The study found several key themes in exploring the student experience of the presidency. These themes demonstrated that students found value experiencing informal presidential encounters and were impacted by their interactions with the leader (Schuemann, 2014). Schuemann also found that “encouraging interactivity between students and presidents benefits students by further motivating their campus involvement, enhancing their connection to the university, and inspiring their student leadership aspirations” (p. 4). This relationship, as noted by Schuemann identified ways that both parties were able to find meaning in their view of the other and saw the importance of the interactions.

## **Theoretical/Conceptual Framework**

The study used Blake and Mouton's (1964) Managerial Grid to guide the research. This theory is based on supervisory and leadership effectiveness and helps understand the impact and style of the institutional leader. This corporate leadership theory is based on types of managers and leaders within an organization. The theory included a managerial grid and has two dimensions of managerial behavior. The first is concern for people and the second is concern for production. From these two concerns, there are five leadership styles that are the result of how someone demonstrates the concerns. They are Country Club (high people, low results), Team (high production, high people), Impoverished (low results, low people), Produce or Perish (high results, low people), and Middle of the Road (medium results, medium people) (Blake & Mouton, 1964). These types help understand how leaders interact with those who work for them and what that might say about the impression they give to employees, peers, and others within the organization. While students do not report to presidents, they may see parts of presidential leadership or hear about it from people that do interact and report to the president. One way to evaluate the style of leadership is to use student responses to understand where the president falls in the grid.

## **Methodology**

A basic qualitative study was conducted involving six individual face-to-face interviews with identified participants attending a Midwestern Community College. Two colleges were used in this study and will be referred to as College A and College B. The face-to-face interview was chosen because it helps the researcher observe, listen, establish a relationship, ask complicated questions, and gather opinions of participants.

Participants in this study were undergraduate students attending a community college and were ages 18-30. These students came from demographic backgrounds consistent with the population of the institution. A purposeful sample of six participants was identified; that is students who were very involved on campus and had a strong awareness of the president as opposed to those who are not as involved on campus and may not have as strong of an awareness of the leader. By targeting a specific population of students, they were able to answer the questions about their perspectives on the president of their respective institution. The intention of having a range of students was to see if there are external influences and experiences that shape student awareness and impression of the leader. Students in parallel roles at each institution were selected to ensure that the information would be more uniform. These students included two student trustees, two student government presidents, and two involved leaders on campus from each institution. Each of their names have been changed to protect their identity.

College A, the rural institutions, had three participants Jane, Sue, and Bryan, and all were interviewed in the spring semester. Jane is the student trustee on campus, Sue is the student body president, and Bryan is involved in several organizations across campus. College B, the urban institution, had three participants, Chelsea, Katie, and Zack. Chelsea is the student trustee on campus, Katie is the student body president, and Zack is a leader on campus. All students had different levels of involvement with the president and different responsibilities that influenced their interactions.

College A has approximately 16,600 students enrolled. Of the enrolled students, the average age is 29 years old and most students the college serves are predominately white. The institution serves mostly regional students looking for four or two year programs and offers degrees in programs like the sciences, arts, engineering, and technical training. It also has an articulation agreement with the regional state school located ten miles away, as well as agreements with many other institutions. The president of College A has a business and corporate background. He has been in his role for three years and previously has experience teaching at a community college. He previously was a vice president at a technical college before taking the presidency at College A.

College B has approximately 20,000 students enrolled. Of the enrolled students, the average age is 28 years old and most students are White (60%), Black (15%), and Latino (6%). The institution serves international students as well as regional students looking for programs related to the health professions, liberal arts and sciences, and humanities. The college is nearby a large state school and has many partnerships like a pathway program to the large state institution. The president of College B has an education background and had previously worked at the institution before becoming president. He has been president for eight years and first assumed the role in an interim capacity.

Both presidents were White males and have their doctorates, but their background and pathway to the presidencies are different. This is their first time in a college presidency but both previously held administration roles in higher education. By having the study conducted at two sites, the researcher hopes to identify more overall trends and themes of student impressions of the president, instead of the themes and impressions from only one institution.

Upon completing the interviews, the researcher compiled and analyzed the qualitative data. Through this analysis, the researcher identified overarching themes and key elements as a way to code the interviews in relation to the research questions. I used organizational categories to identify broader areas to investigate, such as student evaluation of presidential performance (Maxell, 2015). With this process, I found primary and secondary themes to support the research questions for this study. This allowed me to dig deeper into the data, but made findings relevant to the key points of interviewees as to why they had the impressions they have of the president.

### **Findings**

Each participant offered a different and unique perspective about their impression of the president, but there are some overarching trends. Students were interviewed at two different community colleges, and while there are overarching themes and trends. The location of the institution along with the students' roles at the institution needs to be understood before analyzing the findings. The participants all had different perspectives of the president and knowledge of the role, which shaped their impressions.

## Development of Impressions

Student impressions of the president, shifted during their time at the institution. Students were asked questions about their first impression of the leader and their current impression, along with how the impression had changed over time. Sue described how her interactions with the president changed as she got to know him through her experiences as student government president.

My initial view of him was probably ... I wouldn't say I was scared of him but he was the president. Obviously he's a really respectable guy but I viewed him as more of the type of person you would see and would say: Hi [President A] or something like that. Now that I've dealt with him on multiple occasions I feel like I could call him [by his first name].

Over the course of their time at the institution, and based on their level of interaction and involvement the participants identified how their perception of this individual and their role shifted.

**Initial Impressions.** The initial impression is defined as the first memory a student has of the president or the first interaction they recall having with the individual. Participants were asked to talk about their initial impression of the president. Zack, from CCB, shared his first impressions of the college president as being more administratively focused.

I guess you would expect this guy that's really, what's the word, administrative? Just this really professional, polished guy. But when he came to the stage he was laughing and a really bright person. I expected someone who was a very stoic person, you know what I mean? He was quite the contrast.

Chelsea, also from CCB, talked about preparing to meet with the college president;

Well the initial impression I had of him was like "oh my gosh this is a really important guy and he's going to be super proper and I'm going to look like some poor uneducated jack wagon sitting in his office." And of course I had made myself scared for no reason because when I met him he was nothing like that.

**Presidential Interactions.** Each of the participants interviewed was selected because their leadership role provides a higher potential for interacting directly with the college president. Participants were asked about their interactions to gain insight into their understanding of what the president does and each spoke about him from different perspectives. Chelsea said that after she got to know the president, her impression of him changed and he no longer felt like an administrator. "To me, it was almost like the suit fell off and the street clothes came on and he was an everyday guy that you would see shopping at the local Wal-Mart."

Sue, from CCA, talked about how the president's role includes facilitating and supporting other staff members and administrators.

Well I would say his job is overseeing the vice presidents of the college you know. He's their boss of course. I would say he has a lot of power. But, I would say his duties are mainly like making sure other people do their duties.

Katie discussed President B practicing what he preaches when interacting with the campus community.

You have to get yourself out there, let students know who you are. It's kind of hard to have an open door policy as the president of the college versus a teacher or something because obviously the roles are different. But just giving students that trust and the like 'you know who I am if you see me you can come talk to me if I can.' Just building that relationship with them.

Jane identified that President A catered his messaging for the groups that he interacted with on campus, helping him communicate and connect with others on campus and make sure they understand the message he is sharing.

I feel like he portrays the same [persona] in front of everyone. Obviously there is certain parts of a conversation where he'd be more professional, like in a board meeting, but after the board meeting he always shakes your hand and asks how you're doing, how's your day, asks about your family, stuff like that.

**Peer Impressions.** In addition to their own impressions, participants talked about how the impressions of others shaped their understanding of the community college presidency. Katie, for example, had a friend that also had positive interactions with the president.

My friend she used to work here with us, same experiences with him, very positive experience as well. We talked a little about President B. It was never anything bad it was always good things said. I just think he's a great person.

According to Chelsea, students often associate the president with getting in trouble which may contribute to the perception of being an unapproachable administrator. "I [don't] think a lot of students walk around asking about the president because usually if someone is talking about going and seeing the president it's usually not for anything good."

The level of student interactions and presidential presence on campus differed between the two colleges. All three participants at CCA described the president intentionally interacting with students frequently; while two participants at CCB reported interacting with the president and the other student identified that overall few on campus knew that there was a president.

For example, at CCB Zack shared that "level of awareness that we even have a president is not very high." While Katie thought that the president was very active and involved on campus.

I think that's really important being a president of a college. Not only to take care of the college but also interact with the students. I think he does a really good job of that.



At CCA two students referenced a specific example of the president riding a hover board during a student group meeting. This is something that both Sue and Jane shared as it positively shaped their experience with the president. Jane fondly described the meeting,

He didn't stay on it very long and he said that we were going to have to teach him to ride it and he, he's great. I enjoy how engaged he is with the students, at that level too.

All students reported having a professional staff member on campus as a mentor that they interacted with extensively, and how this shaped their experience on campus. Zack, in particular, when asked about what shaped his perception of the president, he talked about his mentor, the director of student life on campus.

I imagine that if I was working here, this is an office setting, it's not, you know, working at a retreat, and so I think if [my mentor] wasn't there without that very strong leadership I would probably have that angst that I used to feel about college and the modern world in general. So, being able to be there and see that leadership helped me have very good impressions of both the college and from that the president too.

### **The Role of the President**

Participants explained how they understood the role of the college president through their involvement on campus. The impressions students had formulated, interactions they had with the president, and observations they made all contributed to their own understanding and knowledge of the role. They described the importance of the president building relationships through being approachable, personable, caring, and relatable. All students saw the president as a multitasker and administrator who communicated with different groups on and off campus, as well as someone who is a role model.

**Presidential Impression.** Participants identified that the role of president and the view students have of that role is important when building the reputation of the campus and experience of the students. Each student identified what they considered to be important in the role of the college president and why.

Sue, who served as the CCA student government president, saw the president as setting the tone for the college when interacting with current and incoming students.

If he went up there and he seemed standoffish and just didn't seem like a nice guy and they would come back and say their president you know, he was really mean or something. Even though you don't deal with him every day I would say that because he's the face of [CCA] it's pretty important.

Chelsea advocated for students to get to know the president and what he does like she has because it would change how they saw the staff and faculty at the college. "If our students knew

how hard our president and our vice presidents work for us, I believe that they would appreciate them a lot more and would seek them out a lot more.”

**Promoting the College.** The participants may not know all the meetings and events the president attends on the behalf of the college, but were able to share experiences where seeing the president at events and activities promoting the college changed their impression. Bryan, a student leader at CCA, talks about how the president promotes the college and works to have a personal connection with him.

If you go to [a large flagship state institution], I’ll be at [a large flagship state institution] next year where there’s 40,000 students. There’s the chancellor there, but I’ll probably never see him. So, I had that same impression when I came to [CCA]. It’s still college. It’s a two-year community college. So he’s going to be a president I’m never going to see. Behind doors in a different wing that would never be open to students. So, like I told you, you can walk into his office, walk into their office anytime during the day. So I definitely saw him as the icon, or kind of a symbol of our campus and now I get to see him on a personal basis where we get to talk. So it’s changed from the end of two spectrums I guess.

Zack, a second year student from CCB, was surprised by the president when he saw him at an event on campus promoting the college.

The only time that I’ve seen him was very recently, just like a week ago. I was at the Events and Activities Fair and he kind of gave a little speech. He’s really a great guy in what he does. He had a lot of energy, more than what I expected actually.

**Supporting Students.** Participants were asked to share how they view the role of a president on campus and what examples led them to hold this belief, and how that influenced their experience at the college. Each identified that supporting students and student success was a major role for the president. Jane, from CCA, talked about feeling like she mattered as a student to the president before she even enrolled in classes.

I was at [CCA] Visit Day. He spoke to us and our group was kind of small that day, I think there was like 26 students or something high school students. He spoke to us and after he was in the hallway where I was and I had just broken my foot that previous night so I had a boot on and everything. He stopped me and said “what are you doing here?” And I said “I’m here to tour campus” and he said “in that boot?” And I said yeah and he said, “well you must really like [CCA].” And I said, “I’m planning on it!” And that conversation was something that stuck with me, he was very cheerful about it, very lighthearted.

Not only did students personally identify as mattering to the president, but they also saw him caring about student concerns as a whole. Sue, from CCA, shared an example of how the president was receptive to a concern student government had about a potential policy change on campus.

We went straight to the president's office. I got out of the meeting and I said all right [President A] needs to hear about this. I go straight to his office he was in there and we talked. We talked for about 15 minutes. I definitely view him a lot higher just as a person. That's great to be the president of the college and just let a student walk in and talk to you about their student government concerns.

Chelsea shared that she had been profoundly impacted by having a personal relationship with President B and getting to know him as a leader. Because of this connection, she wants to stay involved with [CCB] as an alumna. "He's been so impactful on my personal journey that there are board seats coming open after I graduate and I am interested in a full board seat at [CCB]."

Overall, students placed different levels of importance on the interactions they had with the president and how that shaped their journey. Each student had different opportunities to connect with the president which impacted their impression and connection to this individual.

### **Discussion**

Of the two institutions studied, students demonstrated different experiences and impressions of the president, but overall there are some parallels that are consistent. When comparing the student responses to the trends in the research, there are some themes that are present, as well as areas that may require additional research in the future. The understanding students have of the position of president, the connection students believe they have to the president, and the positional expectations students have for the president all shape impressions and contribute to the understanding students have of the presidency.

**Development of Impressions.** The participants' impressions of the president shifted during their time at the institution. At first, students saw the president as an administrative figure and perceived him as not approachable prior to engaging with the individual. As students became more involved on campus and had leadership positions that provided them opportunities to engage, interact, and establish a connection with the president, their impressions changed. Participants said that getting to know the president changed their impressions to one of a friendly and approachable leader. Schuemann's (2014) study presented the idea that students found value in informal encounters and interactions with the president. Students in this and Schuemann's study found that the interactions led the participants to feel more connected to the institution and inspired them to become even more involved. For example, Katie spoke about her initial impression of the president as being positive, which led her to feel she mattered and this made her want to get more involved on campus.

Michael et al. (2001) discussed the importance of students perceiving that they had a direct line of communication to the president. While the president may not be able to respond to all student concerns or address them immediately, participants in this study had the impression that they had access to the president if needed. Student impressions, as noted in the research, are influenced by a number of factors, but the concept of being able to approach a president and have concerns addressed, as well as the chance to have more face time with the president through increased involvement, helped formulate student impressions in this study.

**The Role of President.** The role of a president is a complicated one, where one must balance the needs of many communities, serve as an advocate for the institution, manage a team of administrators, and focus on financial sustainability. (Michael et al., 2001). Some of the participants in this study had formal leadership roles where they interacted with the president while others held positions that required less direct contact with the president. All of the participants had an understanding of the presidency that was based on their own experiences, knowledge of the role, and perceived connection to the president.

Participants understood the president served them, students, as a campus constituency; however, few spoke about the other constituencies as well. The participants also recognized that the president uses different messaging and communication to talk with different groups on campus. Gee and Hart (2015) highlighted the need for presidents to find balance when managing all the components of the role. One of these areas of balance is making sure to interact with the students and the campus community. All of the participants talked about how often they heard the president speak at events, attend campus functions, walk through campus, and stay involved in campus matters. As one of the constituents on the campus, the students in this study certainly felt that the president made choices in their best interest and would listen to them and their classmates about issues and campus concerns.

The campus reputation of a president was identified by students in this study as an important component of the role. Participants discussed the president's personality and presence on campus as elements that formulated their impressions. Students who cited specific examples of seeing or interacting with the president and talked about ways they felt the president was making a difference on campus reported a favorable impression. Those who did not have specific interactions with the president spoke of the president's role conceptually, but had a more difficult time talking about how they saw the president making a difference on campus. The participants could not speak specifically to all aspects of the president's job, which is understood by the scope of their perspective and what is most important to them. The more visible the president is to the students and the more engaged he is on campus the more favorable impression students will have of this individual.

Participants saw the president as an advocate, representative, champion, and voice of the college. Some students talked about specific examples where they had seen the president on campus at events, the most significant being prospective student days or orientation. Immerwahr, et al. (2008) presented the idea of a president acting as a mix between a mayor of a town and a CEO. This cross between the two roles reiterates the importance of a president to serve as the voice for the campus and to speak on behalf of the institution. Participants highlighted that they understood that the president represented the institution and often did so at events, functions, and meetings across campus.

Participants of the study highlighted an awareness of the president serving as a spokesperson or voice for the institution, as well as being involved and engaged in the campus and local community, but did not address other areas of the role such as fundraising, supervision, fiscal management, and so on. This may be because participant impressions were shaped from their own experiences and interactions with the president, which limits the scope and understanding

they have of the position. Participants acknowledged that they saw the president attending meetings and understood that he managed a team, but were unable to speak to the specific responsibilities of the role. Participants were all asked if there was a staff member or mentor that was important to their understanding of college and their experience, and all participants highlighted that interacting with professionals helped them learn more about the college and become more engaged on campus. As a result of this increased engagement and understanding of the campus, students were more likely to have a greater awareness of the president and the campus as a whole. Participants saw the president as role model who leads the campus. Participants may have been intimidated by the leader at first, because of the powerful job and title a president holds, but participants also saw the president as someone to look up to.

Student understanding of the role of a president was rooted in the connection students had or perceived they had with the president. Interactions like hearing the president speak during an admissions event as prospective students or seeing the president serve as an institutional representative at an event influenced the student perception of the role. The participants that were more involved on campus had a greater likelihood of having a better formulated impression of the president. Often, mentors or leadership roles changed the student impression of the leader or strengthened their understanding of what the presidency entailed.

## **Implications**

The study presented several implications for professionals, students, and college presidents across campuses. These implications help identify ways to understand the dynamic between presidents and students at community colleges as well as opportunities to use this research to create more connections between presidents and students.

**Community College Presidents.** Almost one third of college presidents in the United States are leaders of community colleges (The American college president, 2012). Community colleges serve nontraditional and traditional students and are known for adjusting quickly to the needs of the community. Students identified a connection with a president as a key influence on their experience at the college and that they had a more favorable impression of the campus when they had a connection with the leader. A president at community college has a unique challenge when connecting with the wide range of students that set foot on campus each day but, as this study highlights, students find value in any interaction or opportunity to get to know the president. It is critical for presidents to seek out as many opportunities as possible to engage and interact with students. As noted in this study, seeing the president talking to students on campus and speaking at events were profound moments that inspired students to attend the institution, get more involved, and embrace their leadership opportunities.

**Student Affairs Professionals.** Student affairs professionals often serve in a mentorship capacity for students at the institution. They interact with students daily and may contribute to shaping student awareness and experience on campus. Student affairs professionals need to help develop links between the president and the student body on campus. They need to seek out opportunities for the president to engage with students in positive ways and develop a culture where students feel comfortable speaking with administrators. Presidents and administrators

want to hear about student successes and challenges, which helps presidents understand the needs of the institution and serve students.

**Students.** The more opportunities students had to be involved and engaged on campus, the more likely they were to have a perceived connection with the president. Astin (1999) presents the idea that involvement exists along a continuum, with the students' institutional satisfaction improving as their involvement increases. Students who are more invested in campus and have a connection with the president may develop a positive impression of the institution. Participants in this study became involved and engaged on campus which helped them have opportunities to further their careers, develop meaningful relationships, and have a more well-rounded experience at the college. Students need to find ways to connect with the campus and become involved in ways that are meaningful to them.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

There are many opportunities for future research that this study inspires. Some of these recommendations include conducting this study at a number of community colleges in different parts of the United States as well as different types of institutions. This offers a new opportunity to see if the impressions of presidents are different based on institutional type. While this study focused on impressions of community college presidents, but is not a complete and full analysis of the dynamic. Another consideration is the time of the year that students were interviewed. In this study students were interviewed at two different times of the year, which may have an effect on what they discussed and what areas they focused on and the amount of experience they had in their role. The size of the institution may also impact if students awareness of the president and have a positive impression of the president. Another recommendation is researching students who are less involved on campus and their impression of the president. While this study focused on involved students, there may be students who are not involved with differently formulated impressions of the leader. This study included a limited number of involved students from two different community colleges. These students were chosen because of their increased likelihood of interacting with the president; in the future it would be advantageous to study the impressions of students who are not involved on campus. Because this study was limited, it only had White males as presidents; extending this study to look at institutions where a more diverse set of president's may provide different and unique insights. Finally, this study focused on student impressions, but an understanding of impressions of other constituent groups like faculty, staff, alumni, the local community, or trustees may yield different results. All of these recommendations for future research provide opportunities to continue to expand and develop the knowledge of this topic.

### **Summary**

The role of a college president is one that holds a connotation of power and prestige. The president is the face of the institution and the voice of campus. This study highlighted the ways that students see the presidency and the ways presidents interact with students. Often our notion of what it means to be a president, or presidential, may be preconceived and somewhat limited. This study identified ways that the participants began to see and understand the presidency on their own campus through their interactions with that individual. Students have the chance to

hear about the president, interact with the president and continue to grow in their understanding of a president. The connection students believe they have with the president is an important influence of their knowledge of the role and presidential impression. Zack, summed up the idea that our knowledge of the presidency and its role may be rooted in our own understanding and experiences as Americans.

I believe that the position of president gives me something to look up to. And I think that title for a lot of us, especially as Americans really holds that prestige in it. If you think ‘oh you have the president of the college.’ You have this leader here who is speaking for us. I think it’s very, very important, very powerful.

Each president conveyed a unique impression and expectation of leadership that developed the student impressions. These impressions shaped how the student saw the president, connected with the president, understood the president, and the experience the student had on campus.

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