Exploring Non-Traditional Presidents in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

Higher educational institutions (HIEDs) are complex organizations at a pivotal moment in history (Bourgeois, 2016; Guskin & Marcy, 2002; McGee, 2015). This qualitative study sought to understand the leadership traits of nontraditional college presidents, particularly those with business management backgrounds, to determine whether HIEDs could benefit from hiring them to help face challenges today. Results of the study were based on data collected from eight current college presidents collected April–August 2022. Three major findings and several subthemes emerged. Two major findings were expected: college presidents with business management experience are business driven and turnaround driven. A third major finding was unexpected: they are also mission driven. By offering this composite description of these individuals, HIEDs will understand the attributes and potential benefits of hiring college presidents with business management experience to meet their challenges.

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Higher educational institutions (HIEDs) are unique and complex organizations "in that they serve higher, special, and particularly noble purposes" (Ruben et al., 2017, p. 131). Cohen and March (1974, pp. 2–3) described these institutions as "organized anarchies," referring to their conspicuous "properties," including problematic goals, unclear technology, and fluid participation. Currently, HIEDs are also contending with rising costs, the public debate over HIEDs value, enrollment trends, changing demographics, and the effects of the 2019 Covid pandemic (Eibeck, 2017; Grawe, 2018; Kelderman, 2022). Given HIED's complex structures and macro goals to provide for all of society; contemporary leadership is essential, commanding a need for leaders with traditional academic backgrounds, as well as nontraditional ones (Buller, 2021; Ivory, 2017; Klein, 2016; Ruben et al., 2017).

Recognizing the ongoing gap in understanding necessary leadership qualities for today's college presidents (Brown, 2016; Leske, 2015; MacTaggart, 2018; Selingo, 2017), a qualitative phenomenological study was conducted to explore the leadership traits of college presidents with business management experience. Additionally, this study was conducted to better understand the unique lived experiences of college presidents to assist those who hire these leaders.

Over the last five years, an unprecedented number of HIED leaders resigned due to mental exhaustion, job demands and crises (Cech & Hiltner, 2022; Hamilton, 2022; Jiskrova, 2022; Kelderman, 2022). For example, a study in central Massachusetts cited that six out of seven presidents of colleges left their positions in the last two years (Hamilton, 2022). Further, the American College President Study (ACE, 2023) reported that 55% of respondents in their annual presidential survey expected to leave their positions in five years or less.

Using semi-structured interviews with eight college presidents (n=8), the researchers sought to answer the research question: What unique leadership traits do college presidents with experience in business management bring to their positions in private not-for-profit HIEDs in the United States? All participants in the study were current presidents of colleges or universities classified under the Carnegie Basic Classification that include doctoral universities, master's colleges and universities, baccalaureate colleges, baccalaureate/associates' colleges, association colleges, special focus institutions, and tribal colleges. Each participant also had business management experience in positions of leadership at the C-suite levels (executive, financial, operations, or marketing). Three major themes (and several subthemes) emerged from the data: these individuals are (a) business driven, (b) turnaround driven, and (c) mission driven.

Problem and Purpose Statement

HIEDs are at a critical crossroads today (Bourgeois, 2016; Guskin & Marcy, 2002; McGee, 2015). As a result, McGee (2015) espoused the need for innovation in this industry to include accessibility, affordability, accountability, sustainability, and differentiation. Leaders familiar with these types of initiatives are present in various industries but are often associated with business executives (Brown, 2016). Therefore, the problem facing HIEDs today may be assisted by the innovative leadership of college presidents with backgrounds in business management (Attaran et al., 2018; Brown, 2016; Eide, 2018; Howard, 2016; Trachtenberg et al., 2016).

Methodology

To answer the studies research question, eight 1-hour long Zoom interviews were conducted using a purposive sample, from across the US. Although face-to-face interviewing is considered the "gold standard" for this type of data collection, researchers have found Zoom videoconferencing, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, to be an effective medium for collecting qualitative interview data (Archibald et al., 2019; Gray et al., 2020; Reñosa et al., 2021, p. 1). Interviews took place using semi-structured questions to guide exploration in an atmosphere of open dialogue and discussion to capture relevant themes to understand the leadership traits of college presidents with experience in business management (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The interview protocol that was used was designed using a modified version of the quantitative Leadership Trait Questionnaire (LTQ) designed by leadership researcher Peter Northouse, to collect data about these leaders' attributes (traits). Embedding the LTQ into the research design helped the researchers build on the data gathered and added context to participants' stories (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Frels & Onwuegbuzie, 2013). Consideration for this approach was also based on the principles that the trait approach is concentrated entirely on the leader, not the

followers, and promoted the idea that having a leader with specific traits is essential to effective leadership (Northouse, 2021). Northouse (2021, p. 54) also opined that . . . "On a practical level, the trait approach is concerned with which traits leaders exhibit and who has these traits." Shown in the data collected, this approach helped the researchers to build themes that represent vivid narratives of each participants lived experience, as a college president (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Frels & Onwuegbuzie, 2013).

Participants

To identify participants, the study used LinkedIn and a snowballing technique when speaking with existing participants. The researchers posted an IRB-approved message on LinkedIn three different times; the posts showed views of 1,385, 1,730, and 604, respectively. Twenty-two college presidents were identified using this approach. The participants were verified to have business backgrounds after reviewing biographies shown on college and university websites and LinkedIn profiles. As a next step, the researchers verified that the respective institutions met the Carnegie Basic Classification that include doctoral universities, master's colleges and universities, baccalaureate colleges, baccalaureate/associates' colleges, association colleges, special focus institutions, and tribal colleges.

Of the 22 college presidents, 13 were eliminated due to their "past presidential" status or having a more traditional academic career, leaving nine, whom the researchers contacted directly. Using this approach, four agreed to meet for interviews. To find additional possible participants, the researchers utilized snowballing (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This snowballing technique proved to be successful; the researchers obtained seven additional names and contacted all seven. Four agreed to meet for interviews. Table 1 depicts the number of college presidents identified for this study.

Description of the Sample

Of the eight participants in this study, seven were male and one female. However, for anonymity, female pronouns, "she/her/hers," are used to describe all eight. Additionally, seven participants came to their new position directly from senior business management positions. One entered academia after running her business for 12 years and then selling it; she acknowledged, "I may be a little bit more unique; I wanted a clearer intersection between my academic and enterprise life." Interesting to the researchers, six interviewees also requested that they be referred to by their first names during the interviews.

Table 2 provides an overview of the interviewees, referenced as Presidents A–H, who participated in this study and their institution types. It also includes how the researchers sourced each participant, the highest degree attained by each one, and other facts regarding their tenures as president and career background information.

Major Findings

Based on the data collected, three major findings and several subthemes emerged to answer the research question. Two major findings were expected: participants are business driven and

turnaround driven. A third major finding was unexpected: participants are mission driven. Related to the interview protocols design, using LTQ, the unique leadership traits of college presidents are also included in each major finding to better understand the attributes and potential benefits of hiring such leaders.

Major Finding One: College presidents with business backgrounds are business driven

The first major finding was that the interviewees were business driven in their approach to leading their institutions. They were all determined and fixated on goals, relying on data, measurements, and outcomes; one participant stated that "I know every detail, every number about our operation." They self-described traits such as being articulate, perceptive, self-confident, and self-assured. Each one had previous experience in business management at the C-suite levels (executive, financial, operations, sales, or marketing).

When analyzing data associated with being business driven, another finding that emerged was that most interviewees offered that their business experience was helpful. Each participant had been quite successful as a business leader, with an average of 32 years in business before becoming president. Some helped launch public and private companies; many had worked at Fortune 100 or Fortune 500 companies. Four also described themselves as "entrepreneurs." Many found that their previous success as articulate communicators and collaborators assisted them in fitting into their new position.

Regardless of their business success, most interviewees recognized that their leadership approaches slightly differed in the business world compared to higher education. The participants described differences due primarily to the culture of higher education that included shared governance and tenured faculty. One outlier expressed that her leadership style had not changed after the transition from the business world to higher education. However, in each situation, they expressed self-confidence and self-assuredness in winning over faculty and staff; many described themselves as friendly and outgoing, in part, due to the nature of their positions, wherein their presence in front of faculty, staff, and students was paramount.

Most interviewees described themselves as businesslike in their approach. As one stated, "anybody [who] tells you higher ed's not a business is crazy." Many participants referred to the importance of understanding the customer and their needs and that business understands this "better than in higher education." Many described the student as a "customer" and education as a "product"; however, many seemed reluctant to have these opinions known on their campuses. Many offered thoughts on running their institutions effectively, referring to the importance of knowing and understanding their revenues, expenses, profits, or losses, and that they had to run their institutions as businesses without outwardly referring to them as such.

Major Finding Two: College presidents with business backgrounds are turnaround driven when faced with financial challenges

Another major finding was that most interviewees were turnaround driven in their approach. Five self-reported that they were hired specifically to improve their institutions' financial results and long-term sustainability. Four of the five faced financial deficits within the past two years of tax return filings (GuideStar, n.d.). Two others were hired by boards that were "looking for something different" and were selected for their business experiences and proven success as business leaders. Therefore, the researchers concluded that most of them were fundamentally turnaround-driven businesspeople, up for a challenge at this point in their lives. These individuals self-described their leadership traits as persistent, determined, conscientious, and diligent, all characteristics needed for turnaround situations.

Another finding emerged when analyzing data associated with being turnaround driven; most interviewees understood that HIEDs had challenges today. Therefore, upon arrival at their campuses, each one had to quickly learn and assess their organizations and culture. Faced with these turnaround situations, many described the need for new strategic plans and "tough" decision-making; an initial challenge was that many of them were viewed as outsiders, particularly by tenured faculty. One participant described early meetings with faculty as "contentious." However, given their self-confidence and self-assuredness, each participant in a turnaround situation expressed confidence in working with faculty due to experience in business. Four likened their approach in working with tenured faculty to their experience with unions or shareholders or sales representatives and research and development (R&D) personnel.

Regardless of confidence levels, most interviewees described the transition to higher education as difficult, which emerged as another finding; most participants described their frustrations due to the slow pace or lack of urgency. The slow pace and lack of urgency seemed to bother participants, particularly in turnaround situations requiring decision-making in staff reductions and reprioritization of projects; one president shared her frustration by stating, "we're trying to turn this ship around." However, most of those who cited this issue learned to adapt to the slow pace, large numbers of "committees and structures," and concept of shared government.

As a result of the frustrations regarding the slow pace and lack of urgency, a final finding emerged; a different style of decision-making is needed in higher education. Most participants expressed that they could make decisions much more quickly in business, particularly at the C-suite levels. However, these successful and astute businesspeople understood that to make tough decisions in higher education, they first needed to understand the culture and the concept of shared governance. As one participant cautioned, "you can't come in all hardcore business." Three interviewees, faced with potentially unsustainable situations, brought transparency of the financial challenges directly to faculty and other leadership meetings to explain the need for potentially tough decision-making. Another participant implied that higher education has not kept up with the transformational change or innovation needed today. Two others described industries that had resisted change initially; the healthcare, banking, and electronics industries underwent a transformational change, but this change is still needed in higher education today.

Major Finding Three: College presidents with business backgrounds are mission driven when they have ties to the institution

A final major finding that surfaced was that each interviewee was mission driven. Many referred to their "love" for their students, faculty members, and missions of their institutions. Others spoke of feeling a spiritual connection or "calling" to serve as president. Therefore, the researchers concluded that all of them were caring, mission-driven individuals. Each one had some tie to their institutions, such as being alumnae, current or former board members, or had some other connection. Five were alumnae who wanted to give back to their alma maters; one other alumna was hired to "save the school," in her words; and others described spiritual "callings" to serve as college president. They self-described with traits such as being empathetic, sensitive, friendly, outgoing, dependable, and trustworthy.

Six interviewees had no plan to pursue the college presidency position. However, two deliberately did so after successful business careers. Given that most of them did not intend to seek this career, many endured pleadings and prodding from board members or executive recruiters to apply. Successful business alumnae who were former board members were sought after the most. However, many expressed humor when approached by board members or recruiters; for example, one participant stated, "I burst out laughing." Another thought the outreach by a recruiter was "a joke."

Because most of these were reluctant college presidents, another finding emerged: their desire to ultimately "give back," in most cases, to their alma maters. Most of the alumnae expressed their love for their alma maters or the thrill of returning to them; many felt honored to serve the colleges they care about, even though two had semiretired. One non-alumna was fully retired at the time of her selection, and another was leading a successful business; both felt a spiritual calling and accepted the positions. Three shared they "took pay cuts." Therefore, in most situations, compensation was not an issue because each interviewee had been financially successful in prior business careers.

A final finding arose from being mission driven—having ties to the institution. Most participants had some connection to their institution, whether they were alumni, former board members, or had ties to a board member. Therefore, the interviewees were deeply devoted and dedicated to their institutions. Many used the word "love" when describing their jobs, connections to students and faculty, and institutions. This love and dedication translated into long hours and the 24/7 work ethic of being a college president. Each interviewee expressed their love and enthusiasm for their job. When describing her job, one interviewee stated, "I'm having a ball, honestly." Others described being "humbled" by the position.

Summary of Findings

In analyzing the data, the researchers employed Heidegger's "hermeneutic circle" to get to the essence of an understanding (Kafle, 2011; Laverty, 2003; Peoples, 2021, pp. 32–33) by reading transcripts, taking notes, and cyclically interpreting the data. Data analysis revealed three major themes and several subthemes to answer the research question on what leadership traits these individuals bring to their positions at private four-year HIEDs in the United States.

College presidents with business backgrounds are, first and foremost, business driven. All eight interviewees had tremendous success in their business careers. Therefore, a major finding from the data analysis was that each of them brought a business-driven perspective to lead their institutions. Other miscellaneous findings surfaced, such as their business experience is helpful, their leadership approach is different, and colleges are businesses.

College presidents with business backgrounds are turnaround driven when faced with challenges. A second major finding emerged from most interviewees. Many were hired for their turnaround-driven expertise. Their described experiences led to other miscellaneous findings; HIEDs have challenges, the transition to higher education is difficult, and higher education needs different decision-making.

College presidents with business backgrounds are mission driven when they have ties to the institution. A final major finding recognized that each interviewee had a mission-driven approach. Other miscellaneous findings arose that related to this theme; they had no plan to become a college president, had a desire to give back, and had strong ties to their institution.

Discussion

For this qualitative phenomenological study, it was assumed that college presidents with previous experience in business management bring unique leadership traits to HIEDs that help meet challenges (Beardsley, 2017; Peavy, 2020; Selingo, 2017). However, the data available on the traits college presidents with business management backgrounds bring to their positions are limited (Beardsley, 2017; Klein, 2016; Lufkin, 2015). There is a need to understand the benefits these individuals bring as more board of trustees seek leaders from outside of higher education (Brown, 2016; Heuvel, 2017; Leske, 2015; MacTaggart, 2018; Selingo, 2017). The findings of this study demonstrated the unique attributes of college presidents with experience in business management. As a result of this study, HIEDs might consider hiring such individuals to fill open presidential positions in the future.

The following recommendations for practice are presented based on the study findings.

There Should Be No Concern When Hiring a Businessperson

The eight participants of this study were recruited specifically for their business or turnaround experience. Each one had tremendous success in their business careers at the C-suite levels of private and public entities. Many described their adaptability in building and motivating teams, understanding operations, and finance, and tough decision-making. Therefore, when seeking a president with business experience, consideration should be given to candidates with business success. As one college president put it: "If you weren't a successful businessperson, we don't want you as a college president anyway."

The board of trustees of seven institutions sought "different perspectives" from candidates with business experience; five colleges had experienced financial losses or had sustainability concerns. These boards of trustees took chances on hiring individuals that fit this criterion; six

were the first nontraditional president hired. Although they brought business perspectives, there was no indication that these individuals pursued a change in culture or desire to run the institution as a "business"; however, as one stated, the college had to be "run in a businesslike manner." Therefore, HIEDs should not be concerned about hiring such individuals; their experience makes them well-suited to help HIEDs meet current challenges.

Hire Someone with Ties to the Institution

Many participants shared their respect for their institutions' missions; most felt a responsibility to care about, grow, or turn around the finances of their institutions. More than one mentioned their desire to leave their institutions in better shape than when they first arrived. This care was often due to their having ties to their institutions; they were alumnae, were former board members, or had a relationship with a board member. In all cases, the interviewees were deeply committed and dedicated to their institutions. Therefore, individuals with ties to the institution could be potential candidates.

Businesspeople Bring Unique Skills to Institutions

HIEDs rely on executive recruiting firms to source presidential candidates (Lavigne & Sá, 2020). Therefore, executive search firms that specialize in fulfilling academic leadership jobs may find the results of this study beneficial to their recruitment efforts for college president positions. Armed with the results of this study, executive recruiters could prove that hiring college presidents with business experience could bring unique leadership traits to HIEDs, particularly those needing financial turnarounds.

The following recommendations are suggestions for future research, based on the findings of this study.

Explore Traits of Presidents from Other Carnegie Classifications

The study was confined by the Carnegie Basic Classification that only included doctoral universities, master's colleges and universities, baccalaureate colleges, baccalaureate/associates' colleges, association colleges, special focus institutions, and tribal colleges. Presidents with business experience from other types of institutions may possess different traits or attributes. A recommendation for future research is to explore the leadership traits of such presidents in public universities, colleges, and community colleges to find out if they bring unique leadership traits to help these types of institutions.

Expand the Sample Size

The targeted sample size of eight participants for interviews. Although Creswell and Creswell (2018) suggested that a sample size of 3–10 was sufficient, a recommendation for future research could be expanding the sample size to garner possible additional leadership traits that could benefit HIEDs.

Conduct 360-Degree Interviews

The methodology limited this study by using a qualitative approach to inquiry by solely interviewing college presidents who met the inclusion criteria. Consideration could be given to expanding this approach by gathering perspectives of such college presidents from stakeholders of their respective institutions, such as board members, and faculty and staff members. Five participants expressed challenges with working with faculty members, so a faculty perspective could be quite interesting. Therefore, conducting 360-degree interviews with stakeholders could also be considered.

Use Other Data Collection Tools

Finally, the instrument used to collect data employed a modified version of the Leadership Trait Questionnaire (LTQ) to capture views of the presidents in this study. By embedding the LTQ into the research design, the researchers built on data gathered; however, the researchers recognize that other tools could be used to capture data in future studies.

Conclusion

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological hermeneutic study was to explore the leadership traits of college presidents with business management experience to understand their lived experiences. This approach was selected to determine if the population shared common leadership traits that benefit HIEDs, given challenges faced by these institutions today.

The major findings of this study demonstrated that there are unique attributes of college presidents with experience in business management, including that they are business driven, turnaround driven, and mission driven in their approaches to leading their institutions, particularly those with financial or sustainability challenges. In addition, the data showed that the interviewees were extremely kind, caring, and thoughtful individuals who took their positions very seriously regardless of the long hours and 24/7 pace. Many believed that they were unique as nontraditional presidents with business management backgrounds. Interestingly, each one expressed to the researchers their enthusiastic desire to see the results of this study.

As a result of this study, the authors hope that HIEDs might consider hiring individuals with business management backgrounds to fill open presidential positions in the future. Though the interviewees brought business perspectives to their positions, there was no indication that they pursued a change in culture or desire to run the institution as a "business." Therefore, boards of trustees or executive recruiters should not fear hiring these individuals. The researchers also hope that other successful businesspeople, having reached the pinnacles of business-career success, might consider a career transition to leadership positions at HIEDs, particularly those individuals with some relationship or tie to an institution, such as being an alumna, being a former board member, or having a relationship with a board member of an institution. Due to the challenges faced by HIEDs today, individuals with business management experience could be helpful to these institutions and their long-term viability.

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Table 1.
Recruitment Method

	Number Identified	Number Eliminated	Number Contacted—No Response	Number Contacted—Agreed to Meet
LinkedIn	22	13	5	4
Snowballing Technique	7	0	3	4
Total	29	13	8	8

Note: One participant sourced through LinkedIn was interviewed but withdrew from the study.

Table 2.
Profile of Study Participants

President & Source	Institution's Carnegie Classification	Highest Degree Earned	# of Years as Current President	# of Years in Business Prior to Presidency	Previous Title Held in Business	Previous Business Industry Type
A LinkedIn	Baccalaureate Colleges: Diverse Fields	MBA	6	32	COO	Public, Fortune 100
B Snowballing	Special Focus 4-Year: Health Professions	Profess-ional Doctorate	4	35	SVP	Public, Fortune 500
C LinkedIn	Special Focus 4-Year: Business	PhD	3	12	CEO	Public, Fortune 500
D LinkedIn	Master's Colleges & Universities	MS	1	43	President	Nonprofit, Large
E Snowballing	Doctoral/Professional Universities	BA	2	36	CFO	Nonprofit, Large
F Snowballing	Baccalaureate Colleges: Diverse Fields	MBA	5	30	President	Public, Fortune 500
G Snowballing	Master's Colleges & Universities	PhD	25	25	President	Small, Private
H LinkedIn	Baccalaureate Colleges: Diverse Fields	Honorary Doctorate	17	49	Consultant	Various, Large

Note: Presidents B, C, E, F, and H are alumnae or former board members of their respective institutions.