"It's a Sea-change": Understanding the Role the Racial and Socio-Political Climate Play on the Role-Shift of the American College Presidency

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Abstract: This inquiry is part of a larger study focused on whether white male presidents in higher education can respond to racism. In the initial study, the author concluded that while presidents were responsive, their responses were not void of privilege, and highlighted the need to further address white Fragility amongst this group. In an effort to advance our understanding of the American college presidency, particularly how the racial and socio-political climate has shaped their leadership, in the current study, the author analyzed data using the perspective offered by the presidents – higher education is in a sea-change, which was also a finding, as well as specific facets of Astin and Astin' (2000) and Buller's (2015) respective frames of change. The analysis yielded the

importance of naming that higher education is in a sea-change, grappled with the reality of power within the presidency, and articulated the value of being willing over being ready to incite change. In light of these findings, these leaders recognized that not only is higher education due for a change, but so is the postsecondary presidency. Such an understanding expands both the organizational leadership and diversity in higher education literature, respectively.
Keywords: Postsecondary President; Sea-change; Racism; Diversity; Power; Willingness

"Es un cambio radical": Comprender el papel que juega el clima racial y sociopolítico en el cambio de roles de la presidencia universitaria americana

Resumen: Esta investigación es parte de un estudio más amplio centrado en si los presidentes varones blancos en la educación superior pueden responder al racismo. En el estudio inicial, el autor concluyó que, si bien los presidentes respondían, sus respuestas no carecían de privilegios. Avanzar en nuestra comprensión de la presidencia universitaria estadounidense, en particular cómo el clima racial y sociopolítico ha moldeado su liderazgo, así como las facetas de los respectivos marcos de cambio de Astin y Astin (2000) y Buller (2015). El análisis demostró la importancia de nombrar que la educación superior está en un cambio radical, lidió con la realidad del poder dentro de la presidencia y articuló el valor de estar dispuesto sobre estar listo para incitar al cambio. A la luz de estos hallazgos, estos líderes reconocieron que la educación superior debe cambiar, al igual que la presidencia postsecundaria. Tal comprensión expande tanto el liderazgo organizacional como la diversidad en la literatura de educación superior, respectivamente.
Keywords: Presidente de educación superior; Cambio radical; Racismo; Diversidad; Poder; Disponibilidad

"É uma mudança radical": Compreender o papel que o clima racial e sociopolítico desempenha na mudança de papel da presidência da faculdade americana

Resumo: Esta investigação é parte de um estudo maior focado em se presidentes brancos do sexo masculino no ensino superior podem responder ao racismo. No estudo inicial, o autor concluiu que, embora os presidentes fossem responsivos, suas respostas não eram isentas de privilégio. Para avançar nossa compreensão da presidência da faculdade americana, particularmente como o clima racial e sócio-político moldou sua liderança, bem como as facetas dos respectivos quadros de mudança de Astin e Astin (2000) e Buller (2015). A análise demonstrou a importância de nomear que o ensino superior está em uma mudança radical, enfrentou a realidade do poder dentro da presidência e articulou o valor de estar disposto sobre estar pronto para incitar mudanças. À luz dessas descobertas, esses líderes reconheceram que o ensino superior deveria mudar, assim como a presidência pós-secundária. Tal compreensão expande tanto a liderança organizacional quanto a diversidade na literatura do ensino superior, respectivamente.
Palavras-chave: Presidente pós-secundário; Mudança radical; Racismo; Diversidade; Poder; Disposição

Introduction

> Every goddamn day there are things [students of color] have to put up with that are awful and just shouldn't be that way, but you can't be naïve about it. You have to understand that's reality and if you're ever gonna be effective as a leader, as a partner, you have to understand what reality is. (Personal communication, [President] Tori, 2017)

The societal landscape in the United States continues to grow to be more racially and ethnically diverse (Chappell, 2017), inciting racial tensions and shaping postsecondary institutions as microcosms of the greater society. Allen (1992) made note of the racial hostilities that have afflicted U.S. college campuses, calling out "higher education's complacency," which seemingly remains today with little to no resolve. Though postsecondary administrators have been tasked with preparing students for a more diverse global workforce (U.S. Department of Education, 2016), racist acts continue to plague many higher education campuses (e.g. Cornell, Drake, Michigan, and University of Missouri). Perhaps this is so because of the unexamined, and thus unchanging, white culture embedded within the practices of higher education (Gusa, 2010); and such may be reinforced by the fact that postsecondary leadership, specifically that of the college president, remains white and male (Gagliardi et al., 2017; Khwaja, 2017; Statista, 2019). Since the existence, or worse, the allowance of these dueling ideals—racism and diversity—have come to co-exist within the context of postsecondary institutions, stakeholders (e.g. students, activists, community members) have appealed to college and university presidents to no longer be complicit in higher education's complacency. This call not only signals that higher education is in a sea-change, as identified by the current study's participants, but that a shift in their role is also warranted. By shift, the author means a reimagined way of or a substantial change in leadership; one that, in this instance, acknowledges racism as an impediment to diversity, and thus a driving force for institutional transformation. Because "change resistant behaviors and attitudes loom large within these institutions as a means of maintaining the privileges enjoyed by those individuals and groups for whom the system offers the legacy of preferential treatment (Harvey, 2014, p. 92), then these key institutional leaders have to employ new tactics, both in policy and practice, within their leadership that acknowledges and is informed by the racial and socio-political climate.

There is a substantial amount of literature regarding higher education and organizational leadership, including the theories and traits that underline practice (Astin & Astin, 2000; Bryman, 2007; Fullan & Scott, 2009; Gigliotti & Ruben, 2017; Holzweiss et al., 2019; Kezar et al., 2006; Seemiller, 2016; Spendlove, 2007; Wagner, 1996). Additionally, research on diversity in higher education is vast and longstanding (Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Hurtado, 1992; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Hurtado & Ponjuan, 2005; Kezar, 2008; Kezar & Eckel, 2008; Kirby, 2012; Locks et al., 2008; Miró & Gordon, 2018; Rankin & Reason, 2005; Solorzano et al., 2002; U.S. Department of Education, 2016). While informative to address higher education's complacency, these bodies of work only minimally call out white male presidents; who in the midst of demographic shifts and fluctuations in the racial and socio-political climate appear to be at a loss on how to respond to racism (Cole & Harper, 2017; Foste & Tevis, 2018; Jones, 2019; Tevis, 2020). The same can be said about studies that take into consideration the responsibilities and ever-evolving role of the American college president (Astin & Astin, 2000; Bourgeois, 2016; Buller, 2015; Durnin, 1961; Fisher & Koch, 2004; June, 2007; Parker et al., 2011; Piper, 2011; Rile, 2001; 2018; Rudolph, 1962; Schmidt, 1930). Research in this area also minimally acknowledges the previously mentioned fact that the postsecondary presidency remains white and male; and marginally recognizes the aforesaid charge of

preparing students to navigate a diverse workforce. Such a limited focus across the most relevant research related to the current study has perhaps enabled, in this instance, white male presidents to not act in a way that would disrupt higher education's complacency and the complicit behavior perceivably embedded in their leadership. Therefore, the author sought to inquire *does the racial and socio-political climate shape the role of the postsecondary president, in particular for white men? And if so, in what ways?*

Scope of the Study

Focus on the role-shift of the American college president is part of a larger study that explored whether white male presidents can respond to racism on their college campus. Situated within the context of the *year of race* (2015), the author was most interested in whether white males were able to move beyond what they have been "taught" (McIntosh, 1988) to substantively respond to racism. The initial study was grounded in DiAngelo's (2011) white Fragility, which provided an understanding of how distance from racialized others, in most of the significant areas of white people's lives, enables them to anxiously recuse and/or detach themselves, especially during times of racial discord. This lens guided the development of the interview protocol and the analysis of the data. To explicate the role-shift of the contemporary American college president, the author reanalyzed data utilizing sea-change, as articulated by the presidents interviewed for the current study, as well as specific facets of Astin and Astin's (2000) and Buller's (2015) organizational leadership theories that speak to change and the college presidency. Collectively, this made meaning of and expanded the expectations and responsibilities of the postsecondary presidency, particularly when having to consider external factors, in this instance, such as the racial and socio-political climate.

Racial and Socio-Political Climate

Indeed, the racial and socio-political climate ebb and flows along a continuum of the racial dissension out of which higher education in the United States was established; and had only become ambient as an attempt to paint society as post-racial. With that, American society is in a racial regression. With such an understanding, it is important to clarify the key terms that underscore the focus of this study. More often referenced than defined, one can surmise from prior research and special interest groups, that diversity, moving beyond perfunctory ideologies such as critical mass (Tienda, 2013) or difference, is the acceptance and valuing of both the superficial- and deeper-level dimensions of identity; that include but are not limited to: race, gender/non-gender binary, (dis)ability, sexual orientations, language, and religion. On the other hand, racism—new and old-fashioned (Romm, 2010)—can be understood as racial, ethnic, and cultural oppression; and rooted in the ideology of white supremacy, it is then reinforced ideologically (i.e. the ideals that inform beliefs about racial and ethnic groups), culturally (i.e. practices that subjugate racial and ethnic groups), and structurally (i.e. laws and policies implemented to suppress racial and ethnic groups) (Tevis & Croom, forthcoming). Consequently, these ideals—racism and diversity—are mutually exclusive; yet unfortunately, they are inextricably linked in postsecondary spaces in a way that complicates leadership. Thus, by illuminating how cries for justice might effect higher education leadership, there is a real opportunity to inform the role of the college president, specifically those who are white and male, who through this role have the power to transform institutional culture. This is not to say all white male presidents are going to address the ubiquitous effects of racism or value diversity in the same way, if at all. However, as the contemporary president may be aware of staple concerns related to financial preservation, community and donor relationships, technological

advancements, and ensuring these complex organizations remain competitive, they must also be aware of their responsibility to cultivate a more racially just campus. Expressly, these presidents stated that higher education is in a sea-change, which is both a finding and a lens through which to understand their leadership. Their responses further highlighted the reality of their power, as well as the simplicity, yet importance of being willing rather than being ready to act and be informed as key indicators of a shift in their leadership.

Relevant Literature

While there is an ever-growing body of research focused on higher education leadership, there are two areas that undergird the current study: the role of postsecondary presidents and diversity in higher education. Research on higher education leadership has explored but is not limited to effective leadership (Bryman, 2007; Gayle et al., 2011; McCaffery, 2018; Spendlove, 2007); student leadership (Dugan, 2011; Dugan & Komives, 2007; Komives et al., 2011; Wagner, 1996); divisions of higher education (Astin & Astin, 2000; Burkard et al., 2005; Knight & Trowler, 2001; Komives & Woodard, 2003; Kuh, 2009; Waple, 2006); institutional context (American Association of Community Colleges [AACC], 2005; Phelan, 2005); and leading in an ever-evolving technological age (Bates, 2000; Garrison & Kanuka, 2004). While these subareas have shed light on the various facets that inform higher education leadership, they are void of explaining how the racial and socio-political climate effects or should affect how one leads. Allen (1992) projected that racial incidents had "led to considerable self-examination at many colleges and universities and, in some cases, to a revitalization of schools' commitment to Black and other minority students" (p. 27), yet we continue to navigate an insoluble socially unjust racial climate both on and off college campuses; therefore, there is a need to return to a self-examination, particularly, that of the role of the college president.

The Role of Presidents

From across the literature on higher education and organizational leadership, respectively, one can conclude that leadership is to be in position of control and influence; leading an entity or organization. Originally, the role of the president was to be the ultimate power (Rudolph, 1962), an idea the author will revisit in the findings. Schmidt (1930), as cited by Piper (2011), said of the American college presidents, their "authority 'in all matters pertaining to his school's management was nearly absolute'" (p. 37). Durnin (1961) stated "the colonial college president had much authority over his gathering of tutors and students, and that this authority grew with the growth of the institution and the increasing unwillingness of governing boards to deal with minutiae" (p. 25).

Piper (2011) further explained "a person 'did not prepare for [the presidency], as one did for ministry or even a professorship. One was thrown into it and had to muddle through as best one could'" (p. 37). The idea that presidents are not prepared and/or often muddle through the role can be observed today, particularly, when some are called on to respond to racism (Tevis, 2020). Varying forces (e.g. economic, political, technological) have and continue to be the impetus for change in higher education (Bourgeois, 2016), yet there seems to be a lag when having to address the racial climate. This is further exacerbated by hiring practices that value financial acumen over the importance attending to social justice issues in higher education. The postsecondary presidency may require a

> superhuman leader who has a brilliant, compelling vision and who can: attract seven-figure gifts on a regular basis; enlist passionate, generous board members; recruit, motivate, and retain faculty and staff; enroll gifted students; provide insightful

editorials on current local, national and international events; and, in his or her spare time, ameliorate neighborhood issues (Bourgeois, 2016, p. 11).

However, this does not mean diversity should be forsaken, especially as racism on college campuses is on the rise. Though the role of president varies from institution to institution (Astin & Astin, 2000; Rile, 2001, 2018), universally, there is a need within the ebb and flows of racial dissension and beyond, to make anti-racist and diversity policies, respectively, a missional priority rather than figurative.

From preacher and teacher to the liaison between the board of trustees and the faculty and fundraiser, the presidency has evolved over time to accommodate the changing landscape of society, and the explicit demands to do more. Bourgeois (2016) explained the conditions that are the driving force for change for institutions of higher education (e.g. economic, political, social, and technological) also provide an opportunity to invoke bold and effective leadership. However, this does not seem to be the case when the condition is racism.

Again, as a microcosm of the greater society, the racial and socio-political climate in the United States has always influenced the persistent racial injustice prevalent on college campuses (Arkin et al., 2015; Dreid & Najmabadi, 2016; Thelin, 2019; Wilder, 2013), yet not the practices and behaviors of the dominate leadership group. Hence, while prior research continues to highlight the inevitability of change (Buller, 2015), as well as the challenges and the requisite knowledge to be a college president today, it has yet to articulate how the role of the president is informed by racial unrest or social justice movements. "College and university presidents help those in and around an organization make sense out of the circumstances that confront them, particularly during changing and uncertain times" (Bourgeois, 2016, p. 18); this then should include the racial and socio-political climate.

Diversity in Higher Education

Although it is clear why diversity is a value-added (Kirby, 2012; Miró & Gordon, 2018; U.S. Department of Education, 2016), taking stock of the racist acts that have plagued higher education just in the last two decades, indicates there remains a lack of understanding regarding the role of the college president. Prior research and reports that have focused on diversity and higher education have examined racial climate (Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Hurtado, 1992; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Hurtado & Ponjuan, 2005; Locks et al., 2008; Rankin & Reason, 2005; Solorzano et al., 2002; U.S. Department of Education, 2016), explored diversity and identity (Ballenger, 2010; Kezar et al., 2006; Williams, 2013), directly inquired with college and university presidents about the strategies and/or leadership styles that best advance diversity initiatives (Kezar, 2008; Kezar & Eckel, 2008), and most recently, have shed light explicitly on how American college presidents respond to racism (Cole & Harper, 2017; Jones, 2019; Tevis, 2020). Yet, there is a dearth of literature that explicitly explores the role-shift of the presidency with a particular focus whether the racial and socio-political climate urges a shift in their leadership, which has the potential to further social justice reform, specifically on college campuses.

Theory

Mark (participant) stated "the presidency has become more complicated than it was probably since the 1960s...It's a sea-change in culture and worlds, and you're never really prepared for it". Accordingly, a sea-change is "a marked change or transformation in how things are done" (Merriam-

Webster, accessed 16, February, 2019, n.p.). As an American idiom, it offers "a sense of permanence and alteration of something, to the point of it no longer resembling what it once was" (n.p.). This perception is aligned with Astin and Astin's (2000) "Change in Response to Internal Pressures" (p. 73), and "Change in Response to External Pressure" (p. 74), which both convey that major institutional change is outside of but impacts the president. Therefore, change is dictated by the circumstance that brought out the need for it. On one hand, Shute (2006), focused mostly on K-12 education, presented a sea-change as something that can be created. However, Mark, the first president the author interviewed, explained it as something one cannot control or predict. In a sea-change, change is precipitated; and is the direct result of specific events. It would be ideal that higher education could plan a response to the urgent matters that arise, particularly the racial unrest that plagues both society and higher education. However, postsecondary leaders are in a predicament that prompts them to react versus be in a position to craft a well-developed plan, if one would exist in this instance.

Buller (2015) also presented the idea of change, through a "replacement view of change" (p. 30). Within this conception, some old thing "ceases to exist" when a new thing "comes into existence" (p. 32). While the idea of replacement may seem harsh, compared to incremental change, it is relative to what needs to change. When applied to higher education's complacency and leadership being complicit in race-matters, leading in a way that *replaces* these impediments is an ideal change. Buller contended that "in order to declare that an actual change has occurred, something has to remain that is still somehow recognizable" (p. 32). As such, taking up social justice efforts, postsecondary institutions (*the matter*) stay intact, but its policies and practices (*the form*) would change.

The idea that higher education is in a sea-change is not a new idea. The transformation needed to interrupt *business as usual* stems from the racial and socio-political climate, which has always shaped formal learning environments. From restricting access to education for racially and ethnically diverse groups to having to champion diversity as a missional effort, higher education leadership are continually called on to make substantial changes. To that end, going beyond divergent job descriptions and varying expectations and responsibilities of college presidents (Astin & Astin, 2000), the presidents interviewed for the current study recognized the sea-change higher education is in, challenge the power of the presidency, and demonstrate the importance of being willing, all of which informed a shift in the role of the contemporary American college president.

Methods

This qualitative inquiry draws on three one-on-one interviews and follow-up data, originally collected to understand how white male presidents respond to racism on their respective college campus. Upon further analysis, the data highlighted the sea-change higher education is in, and within that, the role-shift of today's postsecondary president. Therefore, the author utilized a cross-case analysis to go beyond a single case (Khan & VanWynsberghe, 2008). By comparing and contrasting across institutions, the author was better able to describe whether the current racial and socio-political climate shapes the role of the postsecondary presidency.

Participants and Site Selection

To answer the research question, one-on-one, semi-structured interviews, were conducted with white, male, university presidents, from three large research institutions on the west coast. (Pseudonyms are used in place of the presidents' names and supporting information.). A purposive

sampling strategy best aligned with the criterion of the larger study, in order to collect data from homogenous participants who, in the interview, self-identify as white, male, and volunteered to participate. The presidents' experiences were informed by their respective terminal degree programs, specifically, their educational training, prior work experience, and region from which they came prior to their presidency. Additionally, all three presidents had previous postsecondary leadership experience; yet, their respective time as a president varied. Leadership experience was important in the initial study, as the author drew specifically on the aforementioned matters that took place at the University of Missouri (See Arkin et al., 2015), and the actions or inactions of former President Tim Wolfe and his lack of higher education experience, which may have contributed to his response to racism on that campus.

All three presidents led large research-intensive institutions, with approximately 30,000 or more students (See Table 1; see Tevis, 2020). These universities all offer a wide-range of majors and programs of study; in addition to robust student engagement programming, according to their respective website. These are also high-profile research institutions, with large research centers with millions of dollars in grant funding. Part of the initial study's analysis, each of the institution's websites reflected their position and stance on racism; which was heavily leaned on to gain a holistic understanding of their response to racism. As a result of the original analysis, in this paper, the author focused on their answers that, in some areas of our conversation were unguided, that referenced the president's role. Doing so allowed me to highlight both the sea-change and the role-shift of today's university president.

Table 1
Participant Demographic Information

Pseudonyms	Years as President	Years within retirement	Degree
Mark	>5	10	Social Science
Joe	>10	<20	Social Science
Tori	<5	5	Business

Data Collection

Data was collected in three phases. In phase one, the author shared the protocol in advanced with the presidents, which they acknowledged was helpful, to give them ample time to reflect on the study's topic, and maximize our time together. The protocol was organized into three descriptive categories (Merriam, 2009): *leadership, race/gender,* and the current *racial and socio-political climate.* The questions were open-ended to allow the presidents to make meaning of how the climate had impacted their leadership. Further, the protocol allowed the participants to go deeper in areas that were unexpected by me as the researcher, which provided data to support the themes developed in this paper.

The interview time was set for 60 minutes, with some room to run over. After each interview, in phase two, pre/post reflection and field notes were compiled, to be analyzed with the professionally transcribed interview data. In phase three of data collection, all relevant publicly

accessible data via the institutional websites and digital records such as strategic plans and initiatives that related to the participants' time at their institution was used to give institutional context.

Researcher Positionality

As a Black woman and praxis scholar, the author's research agenda explores postsecondary infrastructure, particularly, the institutional practices that impact how historically minoritized individuals transition to and navigate postsecondary institutions. As a former scholar-practitioner, the author was often called on to address the backlash of racial unrest, as well as implement and support diversity initiatives. Within these tasks, it was inevitable that the author would draw on race, the race/ethnicity of her students, as well as the race/ethnicity of her colleagues. Moreover, it became clear how the author's role was explicity shaped by the socio-racial climate at the time. Thus, what more should executive leaders be so cognizant and active? As a result, a portion of her research agenda explores the ways in which gender and race influence, specifically, the dominant group's leadership; an underexplored area. This work has led her to interrogate the utility as well as the audacity of privilege and the practice of white culture to understand whether white leaders can be racially cognizant, particularly to disrupt practices that are rooted in whiteness and that perpetuate racism. These ideals further come to bear in the current racial and socio-political climate. National political agendas rooted in race (e.g. affirmative action, Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals [DACA], international bans) have put postsecondary institutional leaders, namely presidents, in a position to respond in a way that disrupts racism and substantively champions diversity, which requires a substantial shift in the role of president. However, for a group of leaders who "are carefully taught not to recognize privilege, as males are taught not to recognize male privilege" (McIntosh, 1988, p. 30)—essentially socialized into privilege, it raised the question of whether they can embrace this needed change in leadership. Understanding whether the current climate shapes the role of the president, in particular, those white males who by media and scholarly accounts are at a loss on how to address these warring ideals—racism and diversity—is paramount to informing the role-shift and ultimately transforming an institution.

Data Analysis and Coding

In the initial study, data analysis and coding began with note-taking during the interviews, which supported follow-up questions. True to the method utilized for this study, new questions were developed to delve deeper into the participants' responses, while attempting to advance the conversation. This led to the development of open codes Merriam (2009). After each interview, researcher-reflections were drafted to note consistencies and differences, observations, and what potentially needed clarifying. These reflections were later compared and contrasted, which led to the development of Merriam's (2009) axial codes. Next, with permission, web-based and other materials were reviewed, and also coded. Lastly, comparing the audio recordings to the typed-written transcripts, a final set of selective codes (Merriam, 2009) were developed, which resulted in the following themes: *higher education is in a sea-change*; and within that is *the reality of their power,* which the participants connected to them needing to be the moral authority, and *the need to be willingness (over readiness).* These things illuminate the role-shift for the contemporary American college president.

Findings

Higher Education is in a Sea-Change

As mentioned throughout the current study, higher education is in a sea-change, as a result of the ongoing unresolved racial climate in the US. Expanding on an earlier point made regarding student activism, Mark explained the context that is driving change:

> So there are a lot of challenges, but you know, the reality is that now, X many years later, as a result of all [the city's politics and racism], it does have a demography that has allowed many of the people, especially of, say, my generation, if they've always been here or mostly been here, of never having to deal—certainly not with peers of a different color—and it wasn't because they were bad people. The opportunity didn't arise. So it's a sea-change for this city. It's a sea-change. And that has made, I think, the anger on the side of some of our students of color greater.

In this statement, Mark is acknowledging, as did all three presidents, the surrounding racial and socio-political climate does impact the institution, specifically Students of Color, which then informs both their leadership and overall institutional change. As a result, the role of the president has become more complicated than it was at a time when it was status quo, if not proper, to ignore racial injustice and its impact on college campuses. Thus, having to recognize and accept major shifts in "culture and worlds" (Mark) is something the presidency, and perhaps white males, are "never really prepared for" (Mark), which is what qualifies a sea-change.

When asked, *have you seen the role of the president change over time?* Mark answered, emphatically, "Totally, totally. Yeah. You know, some of it has changed. It's a difference between institutions, but no doubt there's been a change in the role." He went on to explain how the city and the institution of his last position both shaped how the president of that institution conducted business. "The demands on his time seemed to me were much less than they are now. Clearly, you know, the nature of the issues has ebbed and flowed. You know, clearly we all know that the last few years have been particularly contentious with a whole new wave of student activism."

Relatedly, Tori expressed that he saw his previous role (within the president's cabinet as another major research institution) as less taxing compared to the presidency. Talking about what he observed of the president prior to assuming his current role as one:

> A presidency is different than a [upper-level presidential cabinet position]…Well, the perspective of [upper-level cabinet position], you're doing everything. I mean you're running the place. The president's going to the dinners. The president's getting the plaques and the awards and giving the big speeches and you're working your butt off.

But his current observation is the "president, it's 24/7. I mean you're always on duty." As the conversation continued, like Mark, Tori expressed "It's become more immediate. It's become more intense." Unprovoked, he referenced "Ferguson, and other cases unfolding" that happened hundreds of miles away. Tori then provided an example of the immediacy and intensity of his role, when addressing student activists' dissatisfaction with race relations on campus:

> I listened and I didn't get defensive. It wasn't about justifying what we had done and how they were wrong. It was understanding that they were making it very clear that what exists cannot stand and the only sensible response was, "Well, we're gonna change it because I actually do care and I feel badly we are where we are and we're gonna act differently going forward." That's what we've done. So, we've made a number of changes over the last couple of years. We've added some really terrific people. So, we'll see.

This further illustrates how the racial and socio-political climate in America is shaping higher education in such a way that requires presidents to be globally-responsive. Tori said, "Even though we think of ourselves and we are a community, we're attached to not only the surrounding community [in this city], but the county, and we're attached to the world." Such a declaration is an indication that institutions are impacted; are in a sea-change brought about those external forces outside of the institutional community, broadly, as much as the forces within the community.

Lastly, Joe, the third president the author interviewed and the one with the least years of experience in this role, explained change in the role of president this way:

> the role in the set of issues one deals with has grown tremendously, and is more typical than was in the past. I think that we're currently seeing issues, I think, race/diversity issues have come to the floor, and they sometimes can generate divisiveness. In addition just more demands to do things and to resolve things, so there's more competing views...with all of those things, makes the job of a President, as far as I've heard from people, much more difficult and also much more interesting.

When probed about diversity and inclusion issues, specifically, *do race and diversity issues impact how you lead and the decisions you have to make for that day?* he answered:

> diversity and inclusion are tremendously important as they are throughout the country right now, and at universities, if the country gets a cold we get pneumonia and so, to really be on a more optimistic note, if we're going to solve the issues, solve the problems that arise because of differences of opinion about diversity and inclusion those solutions will be found in the universities first.

Once again, across all three presidents, while racial unrest and the tenuous socio-political climate are not new, there is a need to recognize that it has a great effect on institutions of higher education; and presidents find themselves in a position to have to lead accordingly.

The Reality of Power

With this new found understanding of the sea-change higher education is in, the findings now take us deeper into the role-shift of the presidency. In this transformational season, white male presidents of research-intensive institutions have had to come to the realization that part of their role-shift is also a shift in power. The aforementioned calls for presidents to respond to the racial and socio-political climate are tied to the idea that the president is the ultimate power on a college campus, and the *one* who can facilitate change. Therefore, the author came into the discussion with the following question: *do you see yourself as the ultimate power?*

Mark, who brought up power before the author could, stated that those who desire to be president, "as a young man is definitely unqualified." He went on to explain:

> You can't possibly understand what the job means, so that then means that you're purely attracted to a perception of prestige or power or whatever – whatever the heck – and, you know, it cannot possibly be based on a realistic assessment of how well your skills match up with the needs of a job.

His statement reflects the cursory understanding of what it means to be president; that it is a position of *ultimate power*. Yet, the times are demonstrating this is a false assumption.

Joe pushed back on the question of being the ultimate power. When the author explained it in layman's terms as being *untouchable* or being the central decision-maker, as prior research has conceptualized it, he expressed:

> Let me just say, untouchable: so my predecessor was fired, his predecessor was fired. So, I'm not untouchable. I don't think any President in this nation is untouchable or views themselves as, what you said, the ultimate power, quote/unquote. This is a very challenging time for people to be President. The President of Missouri, probably did think he was, and was gone very quickly; he wasn't the ultimate power. And, I think we all report to a board of trustees or a board of regents. Some report to the Governor...and they are, if you will, the ultimate power for these universities, because you know I serve at their pleasure. They hired me, they can fire me. So, really if you're a President today you're serving multiple local constituencies, so you have authority, a moral authority, and you have certain legal authorities, but at the end of the day none of it is ultimate, and you're really only as good as the decisions you make that week.

Joe then went on to explain he and his leadership team "made decisions with the interest of the people in mind, who were making the demands on us", versus what he and leadership team had actually wanted to do.

Tori also negated the idea that the president is the ultimate power. He stated, "Well, I guess I see myself as the ultimate responsible party. Because, at the end of the day, if we don't get to a hell of a lot better place, it's on my watch." He followed up with:

> Am I absolutely in control? Absolutely not because so much of what happens out of view of me. You know the question is, "Do you take action when you're made aware of things?" That much I can do, but I'm just sure there's so much in the way people treat each other that escapes my view and never comes to my attention and some of it's probably pretty awful and harmful and you hope that there are others who are in the moment – in the situation who would do the kinds of things – take the kind of actions – that you would take.

Within both Joe's and Tori's responses, lies another responsibility worth highlighting when understanding the role-shift of the postsecondary presidency, not present in the literature; that is to be the moral authority on campus. Though Tori mentioned it in passing, there seems to be a collective sentiment shared. Tori followed up by articulating, after reflecting on his response to students who had shared their negative experiences and felt the administrations had not kept their word, "I promise you we're gonna go out and figure out how the hell we get to a better place and we're gonna implement it".

Again, all three participants reiterated that the presidency is not the ultimate power; and further decentralized their power. They disrupt the belief that the president is the stand-alone absolute being. Instead, the president, especially within the context of the racial turmoil, is the more of the *responsible* facilitator, morally obligated to act.

Willingness over Readiness

In going deeper into the role-shift, each of the presidents interviewed also highlighted the importance of being *willing* to act versus being *ready*. While they are often used as synonyms, there is a nuanced distinction between willingness and readiness that will advance our understanding of the presidency. To be willing is to be "[prompted] to act or respond; to act without reluctance;" whereas

readiness is defined as "a state of preparation" (Merriam-Webster, accessed 16, February, 2019). As expressed by Mark being in a sea-change means one cannot be ready, or as he put it "foresee everything," partly due to "the randomness" of, in this instance racism. However, being willing, which seems simple, was actually a critical component of these presidents' leadership. Mark added:

> You can't predict the nature and the course of conflictual situations perfectly, but nobody can. Given the climate in the country now, I think it's better to overcompensate, to spend more time, to do more outreach, to listen more.

Tori shared a similar sentiment. "You have to be able to respond pretty spontaneously to whatever comes at you because things are coming at you all the time." This indicates, as a result of the sea-change higher education is in, being ready to do the work required of these presidents is not always an option, but being willing is. Joe expressed that "Presidents right now are working in a way through issues, trying to be proactive, trying to move their universities forward and achieve progress." This aligns with Mark's earlier point about overcompensating; being active overall demonstrates one's willingness to not only get engaged but stay engaged. All this is to say, there is value in being willing, especially when one cannot be ready or prepared. So, with racist acts that reflect the civil rights era, and student activism on the rise, being willing to respond to and engage with the campus community becomes both a professional, and as indicated earlier, a moral imperative.

Discussion: Informing the Role-Shift of the Presidency

As a reminder, this study is part of a larger study focused on 2015 as the *year of race*. The author inquired *does the racial and socio-political climate shape the role of the postsecondary president, in particular for white men*? *And if so, in what ways?* To answer these questions, the author analyzed the data from the perspective emphasized by the presidents interviewed – that higher education is in a sea-change, which the author then connected to both Astin and Astin's (2000) and Buller's (2015) specific frames of change. The presidents' reflections shed light on the ways in which the racial and socio-political climate shapes the role of the postsecondary presidency, specifically for white male presidents. Tori, as we were wrapping up, speaking on the presidency as a whole, expressed "Some days are better than others. Some days maybe nothing, but that tells you nothing about tomorrow". This statement sums up the current affairs of higher education; being in a sea-change means nothing can be expected.

Each of the participants recognized the unavoidable change higher education is enduring; a transformation long time coming. Unlike Astin and Astin's (2000) and Buller's (2015) depictions of change, the sea-change these presidents expressed, rooted in racial unrest and divisive political rhetoric, was unpredictable, yet critical to their leadership and has the potential to advance social justice reform. And though both frames illustrated the utility in external forces, Astin and Astin, and Buller overlook the persistent racial climate, which has always shaped higher education. Moreover, as prior research (Ballenger, 2010; Kezar, 2008; Kezar et al., 2006; Kezar & Eckel, 2008; Williams, 2013) explored issues related to diversity, identity, and/or university presidents' leadership styles that move the needle on diversity initiatives, they too avoid one major consistency in higher education, that its leadership remains white and male.

The most recent literature does shed light on how American college presidents respond to racism (Cole & Harper, 2017; Jones, 2019; Tevis, 2020), and finds presidents' statements perpetuate racial status quo (Foste, 2019; Jones, 2019). Further, Cole and Harper (2017) found "College

presidents are oftentimes willing to address the racist but rarely the racism" (p. 326), highlighting the importance of being willing, yet falling short on facilitating change. This is important in relation to the findings of the current study. Presidents need to make sure that their willingness does not inadequately or only surfacely addresses the challenge at hand, otherwise their leadership has the potential to exacerbate matters of racism, and as such diversity cannot advance. While simple, being willing is advantageous, and aligns with Astin and Astin's (2000) internal and external pressures for "institutional scenarios for the development of change initiatives" (p. 72), as it becomes the first, and necessary step, in a long process of institutional change.

Implications for Future Research

While the current study is focused on white men, as the dominate leadership group, there is room and perhaps a need for understanding women's leadership and approach to cultivate a more racially and socially just campus; considering their perceivable understanding of oppression (Tevis, forthcoming). Though women have not assumed leadership roles in higher education at the same rate of men (Hill et al., 2016), for those who have, taking a deep dive into how they address these ongoing issues may expand how leadership has to shift on college campuses, and further advance our understanding of the relationship between leadership and identity.

Furthermore, though leadership styles were not germane to the research study overall, the findings do beg the question of which leadership style best facilitates leaders being informed by the racial and socio-political climate, and ultimately, lead accordingly. Tevis, Pifer, and Baker (forthcoming), in a study that explored women leaders' response to crises in higher education, found adapted leadership was a useful framework and approach to understanding how leadership must change - adapt. Hence, future research should continue this line of inquiry, exploring more specifically leadership approaches that facilitate change, and do so across affinity groups.

Moreover, an investigation into the role educational training (i.e. higher education, student affairs, public policy, economics) plays in attending to the greater racial discord that has plagued society, and thus college campuses, may advance our understanding of the ways in which one leads. Lastly, it may behoove prior research to extend this research into community colleges and other institutional types where the student population is often more diverse than it is within the contexts the participants lead. Inquiring how the racial and socio-political climate shapes leadership within varying postsecondary contexts, could broaden our understanding of leadership widely and shed light on whether leadership and approaches to responding to the racial and socio-political climate vary by context, and if so, in what ways.

Conclusion

Media headlines have highlighted the racial unrest that seemingly runs rampant across college campuses, further bringing to light the shortcomings of higher education leadership. As such, the expectation was that white male presidents, particularly those of major research-intensive institutions, would be unreachable, or worse, defensive. In exploring the ways in which the postsecondary presidency is informed by the racial and socio-political climate, the presidents made clear it is time for those who occupy this role to pay attention. The findings of this cross-case study indeed answer the research questions; yes, the racial and socio-political climate shifts the role of the presidency, in ways that have seemingly been ignored in times past, bringing into focus the reality of their power as well as the importance of and the need for leadership to be willing, especially when being ready is not an option. In light of the racial incidents on their respective campuses,

surrounding communities, as well as nationally and globally, such cognizance is necessary for long-term institutional change to take place. With that, diversity cannot be a value-added to the institution writ-large, and related policies and initiative cannot be fruitful, until the prevailing leadership takes stock of and accounts for such external forces. It is then when institutions of higher education can begin to break away from societal norms of status quo, and start to be the beacon of hope to address issues of social injustice, for which it is often looked to.

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